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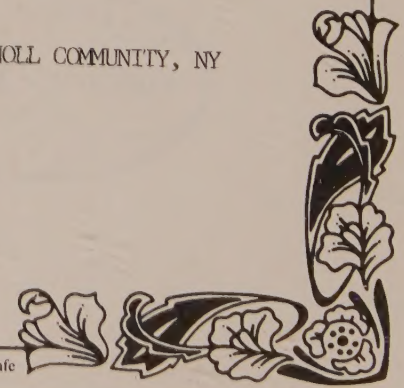

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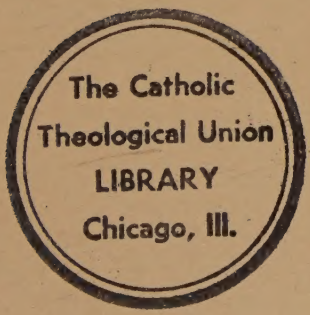
# SIR THOMAS MORE

(THE BLESSED THOMAS MORE)



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# SIR THOMAS MORE

## (THE BLESSED THOMAS MORE)

WITHDRAWN

BY

HENRI BREMOND

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To

MY ENGLISH FRIENDS

IN GRATEFUL MEMORY OF

SO MANY KIND WORDS

AND KINDER DEEDS

# PREFACE

This little book is not the work of a historian. I should not have ventured to undertake it, if the life of Sir Thomas More had not been already written by a member of the craft. Father Bridgett's work is soundly critical; I have followed it step by step and sometimes simply abbreviated it. Needless to say I have carefully re-read More's works and the contemporary documents which the monumental collection of the *Letters and Papers* renders universally accessible. My object in doing so was not to gather a few trifling discoveries, forgotten or overlooked by scholars like Father Bridgett and Mr Gairdner, but to give a lively and fresh impression of the events, and to become as familiarly as possible acquainted with Sir Thomas More. His nature, for all its limpidity, is difficult to know thoroughly. Ever in earnest and ever in fun, its very transparence adds to its mystery, and the extreme variety of its gifts is disconcerting. I flattered myself that I could paint More exactly as I saw him, but my ambition was greater than my strength. The most delicate chapters of this life would have to be rewritten, and the rest indefinitely retouched. I have not sufficient confidence in myself to begin the work again, and I must be content to call the reader's attention to the documents that will enable him to draw a portrait

of Sir Thomas More for himself. To any one who cares to make the attempt I can promise plenty of edification and pleasure.

A man of letters, a family man, a statesman, and, in addition, a man of constant faith and exemplary piety, More may become for us all a friend for all hours, as Erasmus calls him: *omnibus omnium horarum homo.* Wit and goodwill, wisdom and courage, there is nothing that this saint of modern times lacks to be enrolled among our dearest patrons and models, *ut nihil in eo desideres quod ad absolutum pertineat patronum.*

# SOURCES OF THE LIFE OF MORE

HITHERTO, by rare good fortune, Sir Thomas More has suffered comparatively little at the hands of his biographers. Twenty years after his martyrdom, his son-in-law, Roper, a worthy soul who made no profession to literature, fixed the main lines of his life and related the essential anecdotes in a slender volume which is of infinite value to all students of More. This work, the starting-point of all subsequent lives of More, circulated from hand to hand in manuscript, and was not printed till 1616. Under Mary Tudor, Nicholas Harpsfield, Archdeacon of Canterbury, got hold of Roper's work, and undertook, apparently, to raise it to the dignity of history. His work, a useful, conscientious, and tedious book of reference, was never printed, and never deserved to be.[1] However, Thomas Stapleton, a young priest of genuine ability who remained in England till the accession of Elizabeth, faithfully noted down the reminiscences which were confided to him during a long intimacy by former members of Sir Thomas More's household.[2] It is commonly admitted that

[1] Father Morris, who thought of writing a life of More, had Harpsfield's MS. copied. This is the copy used by both Father Bridgett and myself.

[2] John Clements, his children's tutor, who married Margaret Gigs, a girl brought up with his family, and John Harris, his secretary, who married Dorothy Colley, Margaret More's maid.

Stapleton may have consulted Roper's notes at leisure, though it is strange that a writer so careful always to mention his authorities, has forgotten to give references to the earliest and the most authoritative of all. But for Father Bridgett's opinion, I should be tempted to raise a doubt on the subject; but in any case, Stapleton's researches are in the main at first hand, and his evidence is almost as valuable as that of an immediate contemporary. He left England, a voluntary exile, for Louvain, and there at last set to work to write the lives of the three saints whose name he bore—Thomas the Apostle, Thomas à Becket, and Thomas More.

John Harris, More's secretary, and his wife, Dorothy Colley, who as a girl had been in the service of Margaret More, went into exile with him and lived near him, and at every step he could call upon them for reminiscences and advice. To John Harris we owe several precious letters preserved by Stapleton alone. The book was published at Douai in 1588 under the title of *Tres Thomae*, and on the whole is excellent.

Till quite recently, the biographers who followed (and happily they were few) did nothing but amalgamate Roper and Stapleton. The most original and spiritual of these rhapsodies is the only one that need detain us. No doubt, in relating the life of his great-grandfather, Cresacre More thought he was writing an original work, and took himself in all good faith as a witness to tradition. When all is said, his additions to his predecessors' work are unimportant and always of doubtful authenticity.

He is a Joinville who never knew St Louis; and at the same time the most deliciously naïve, worthy, and pious of biographers.

After Roper and Stapleton, the writer who has deserved best of Sir Thomas More is Father Bridgett. His book, which followed close on the decree of beatification, fulfils the demands of the most minute criticism, and may be considered henceforth as the classic life of the martyr. Unfortunately it is a mass of solid material arranged in no kind of order; no lively image stands out from the relation of events, and when at last we close the book we know all about its hero, but know him not at all. Mr W. H. Hutton's book is written with far more art, and makes very attractive reading. I should have liked to quote from it often, but the portrait by Holbein and Erasmus's letters on More make one exacting, and many no doubt will find the book, patient and thorough work as it is, a little wanting in originality and relief.

I cannot attempt to enumerate here the shorter studies and other essays. There is one, however, that deserves to be set apart, and far above the rest, the chapter in Sir James Mackintosh's *Lives of Eminent British Statesmen*. The sketch is heavy in style but unusually penetrating. After Holbein and Erasmus, it is the most intelligent and illuminating study I have met with.

In France, where the *Utopia* was formerly very well known, we have not a single original life of More. Audin, who long enjoyed the monopoly amongst us of everything connected with the Refor-

mation, had a translation of Stapleton made under his supervision, and added notes which are sometimes interesting.[1] The little American life by Walter has also been translated. Finally, More is one of the heroes of D. Nisard's triptych on the Renaissance.[2] This portrait was drawn *con amore*, and leaves a more precise and vivid impression than those of the English historians. At the risk of appearing impertinent, I must say that for that very reason I have found the book the more irritating. In the English Lives we see, at the worst, no portrait at all; here we certainly have a portrait, but one in which it is impossible to recognise the original. I must ask pardon in advance for any touches of ill-humour I may have chanced here and there to show in expressing myself on this subject.[3]

[1] The translation is often faulty and always very free. It was published by Maison in 1849.

[2] D. Nisard: *Etudes sur la Renaissance: Erasme, Morus, Melancthon.* These studies appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1836-1838, and were re-printed in 1855. Though revised, they remain a youthful work. Nisard prefers to Latinise the name of More.

[3] In his two volumes, *The Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More* and *The Wit and Wisdom of Blessed Thomas More*, Father Bridgett has collected not only all the most important documents, but also a large number of extracts from More's works. I have found it more convenient to refer, whenever possible, to his two books. B. i. indicates the *Life;* B. ii. the *Wit and Wisdom.*

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# THOMAS MORE

## CHAPTER I

### YOUTH

### (1478-1510)

"*Thomae Mori ingenio quid unquam finxit natura vel mollius, vel dulcius, vel felicius?*" (Erasmus, v. 2, Lond.).

"I LOOKED to find a preacher, I find a man." No sooner do we become the least intimate with one of the beatified whom the Church appoints for our veneration than we reach a similar conclusion. "I looked to find a saint, one of those vague and fabulous beings, that is, whose every word is an oracle and their every act a marvel. I find a man."

We need not point out to the readers of this Series that there is nothing more consoling or more edifying than such a discovery. We never imagined that our patron and model was so accessible, and great is our delight at finding that his nearness to ourselves is no obstacle to his being also very near to God. Sometimes, however, our surprise is almost too great. There is a danger that our first vivid glimpse of the holy man or woman in the simple reality of their lives, and stripped of the veneer of convention under which most hagiographers used at one time to stifle the originality of their subjects, may disconcert our devotional habit. In all loyalty I must admit that Thomas More is of that number. His

life, indeed, is spotless, and his biographer can relate it without paraphrase or reticence; but in such a life as his, it is possible, if I may so express it, that a period of sin would be less of a stumbling-block than a certain way of speaking and acting which agrees but ill with current ideas of saintliness. We know very well that saintliness is never pompous and willingly leaves grand airs to less genuine virtue. The most austere of the saints could smile. There is no rule of perfection to forbid their seeing the amusing side of things, and their souls, less heavily weighted than our own, often attract by a witty mixture of kindliness and a touch of malice. And yet the lightest of their jests finds a natural setting in a chapel or a cloister, and every flower they gather takes in their hands the scent of incense. This could not be said of Thomas More. At first sight he is entirely profane. If to be worldly is to look upon this world as a curious spectacle rather than to see life as the great stake on which eternity depends, then he was worldly. Not that he espoused folly; but his method of despising it was rather that of the dilettante than the Christian. Or rather, it would be truer to say that he was interested and amused by everything. He will close the *City of God* to open the *Dialogues* of Lucian. He lays by Colet's sermons, to engage in a contest of wit with his friends. "All the things of this world amuse him, even the most serious. With men of learning he is ravished by their wisdom; with fools, he is delighted at their folly. . . . You would take him for a new Democritus, or a Pythagorean walking, with unpre-

judiced mind, about the market-place to contemplate the tumult of buyers and sellers." So says Erasmus, who knew him better than any one. But that name, the name of Erasmus, enables us to shorten our comments. At first sight, no doubt, if only at first sight, their contemporaries saw no difference between Erasmus and More. They were taken for twins, and the idea delighted them both. I even imagine that in conversation More had more spirit and more wit than Erasmus. "From childhood," writes Erasmus, "he had such a love for witty jests that he seemed to have been sent into the world for the sole purpose of making them; though he never descends to buffoonery, neither gravity nor dignity seem made for him. He is amiable and always good-tempered, and puts every one who meets him in a happy frame of mind." Another intimate friend, Richard Pace, says the same thing less gracefully. "He speaks with the same facility in Latin as in his own language. His sense of fun is joined with perfect refinement—you may call humour his father and wit his mother. When the matter requires it, he can imitate a good cook and serve up the meat in sharp sauce. . . . From every philosophic sect he culled the best they had to offer; but at last, as men will, he inscribed himself a member of a school, the school of Democritus, the philosopher, as I understand, who laughed at all human affairs. But he contrived to go further than his master, *nam, ut ille humana omnia ridenda censuit, ita hic deridenda.*" [1]

[1] Bridgett, *Moriana*, a pamphlet in which More's biographer has collected a number of Latin tributes to his hero.

That was how his intimate friends spoke of him, and no doubt this rough sketch was strictly accurate. That, beyond question, was the impression More left on the London of his time and the Court of Henry VIII. Such a sketch as that, of a lively, airy, witty, irresponsible person, would certainly never have inspired Flandrin with the wish to add a new character to the lifeless and majestic procession which even now still embodies the common idea of a saint.

That view of him is a perfectly true one, even truer than I can express. But there was another and still truer Thomas More. The perpetual jester is the sweetest-natured of men; the worldling has death constantly in his thoughts; the Democritus has the soul of a Carthusian. His intimate friend Erasmus knew him well, and his memorable letter to Ulrich von Hutten, which gives the final portrait of Thomas More, comes to a close in the long perspective of these two lines: *cum amicis sic fabulatur de vita futuri saeculi, ut agnoscar illum ex animo loqui, neque sine optima spe.* With his friends he so speaks of the life of the world to come that you know him to be speaking from his heart and not without the best of hope.

Before plunging into the depths of that inner life of his, let us take a glance at him, not in his oratory, but in the very midst of one of his profane conversations, and we shall soon understand how necessary it is, in the face of so complex a physiognomy, to distrust all hasty conclusions and misleading evidence.

Take his portrait by Holbein. Standing for the first time before this wonderful likeness, one cannot fail to be struck by an impression of half-sadness. More intimate acquaintance soon shows that the word "sadness" does not quite hit the note. Melancholy, in the romantic sense of the word, would be falser still. His mind is too healthy, his sense of humour too quick, and his Christian faith too serene. But neither good sense nor internal peace are, properly speaking, joy. There is plenty of kindness and some shrewdness, but no lively gaiety in his veiled and distant look, his small, grey, short-sighted [1] eyes, which, according to a contemporary, "were not great, nor yet glittering, yet much pleasing." [2] He lacked a kind of expansion and taste for life. He was rarely in high spirits. No doubt he was the pleasantest of companions; the gravest unbent when he was by. Some unexpected jest was always hovering on the delicate lips whose smile has been subtly fixed by Holbein; but he scarcely ever laughed himself. Affectionate and faithful, he was slow to give his friendship, and then never gave it without reserve. Possibly his friends loved him more than he loved them, and I am tempted to wonder whether his humour did not conceal an invincible reserve or some timidity of sentiment. The strange and touching story of his two marriages will be found to confirm the first conclusion.

[1] More afterwards attributed one of his illnesses to his habit of "stooping and leaning on his breast as he writes" (*Letters and Papers*, vii. 287).

[2] Wordsworth, 4th Ed. II. p. 183. *Cf.* MSS. Harpsfield, 184,287.

There is nothing surprising in it, when we call to mind the dry and incomplete education More received, one which would have stifled for ever a less happy disposition. Later in life he delighted to repeat his father's unpolished jests, but of his mother he remembered nothing. From her, no doubt, he inherited the charm, the indefinable attractiveness celebrated by his contemporaries (at any rate, if we may trust the portrait by Holbein, there can have been nothing whatever of the judge in the delicacy and grace that radiated from him so discreetly); but it seems that there was no attempt to find the orphan any feminine tenderness in place of the care of his dead mother. The habitual companions of his boyhood were men of mature age, priests and scholars; and, indeed, the marvel is that Thomas More, whose childhood was too brief and who became serious all too soon, should ever have been able to hold out against such an atmosphere, and preserve throughout his life, if not the "long hopes," at any rate the spirits, the freshness, and the generosity of youth.

## II

Almost from his cradle More was entered of a good school of wit. As we shall see, his father, the judge, had but a poor opinion of things literary. To him, perhaps, Erasmus was nothing but a kind of idler,[1] and in any case he was determined that his

[1] Erasmus, at any rate, speaks of him without enthusiasm.

son should be a man of affairs like himself. For my own part, I consider that the event proved him right. His early connection with practical life though it may have made More less learned than a pure humanist, resulted at any rate in his intellect being less bookish, more human. His father, moreover, was a judge of the first order. Holbein shows him us, at over sixty, with his eyes still sparkling with lucid intelligence.[1] "Courteous, affable, innocent, gentle, merciful, just and uncorrupted"—we are quoting his son—he was both loved and feared in the little world of the palace for his keen wit. The fact is worth noting, since Thomas More, even in boyhood, must have sharpened his wit on the paternal sallies. He himself has piously saved from shipwreck some of the good things which his own were soon to eclipse. The judge's pronouncements showed no tenderness to women; "for when he heareth folk blame wives, and say that there be so many of them shrews, he said that they defame them falsely. For he saith plainly that there is but one shrew-wife in the world, but he saith indeed that every man weeneth he hath her, and that one is his own." Another saying of his was that nothing was so much a matter of luck as marriage. "If ye should put your hand into a blind bag full of snakes and eels together, ye would, I ween, reckon it a perilous chance to take up one at adventure." Whereupon Father Bridgett, with that bland curiosity of his, remarks that, "as Sir John More was three times married,

[1] Holbein's sketch is at Windsor.

it would be interesting to know the date of these sayings, and whether they embody the fruits of his experience, or were a kind of humorous philosophy.' And he recalls an epigram of Thomas More's against the lovers of witticisms of this kind :—

> "Hoc quisque dicit ; dicit at ducit tamen,
> Quin sex sepultis, septimam ducit tamen."[1]

The date of Thomas More's birth seems now to be settled beyond question. He was born in the city of London on the 7th February 1478, in the seventeenth year of the reign of Edward IV. The civil war was then in full swing, and More could recall later how, when he was five years old, he heard a neighbour predict the coming triumph of the Duke of York, who was soon to be known as Richard III. At the first school he was sent to he had an excellent Latin master, Nicholas Holt, who had already taught Latimer and Colet, and was the author of a Latin grammar with the alluring title of *Lac puerorum*. The boy was then taken into the household of Cardinal Morton,[2] Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor of England.

The great ecclesiastical dignitaries of those days had a certain number of pages in their service, who finished their education in this manner. So varied and picturesque an existence must have brought both pleasure and profit to a boy with the keenness and universal interest of Thomas More. It was one of the pleasantest recollections and most fruitful periods of his life.

[1] B. i. 5.

[2] Morton had not yet received the hat.

Nothing tends more to form and elevate a boy's mind than the enthusiastic devotion youth can pay to a man of worth in the daily contact of the home circle. The Cardinal made a profound impression on Thomas More. He stood in the boy's eyes for an incarnation of the Church and of devotion to the great interests of his country. Long afterwards, More was to speak of him in *Utopia* with a wealth of admiration that was rare with him, and a fresh and lively gratitude.

"He was of a mean stature, and though stricken in age, yet bare he his body upright. In his face did shine such an amiable reverence, as was pleasant to behold, gentle in communication, yet earnest and sage."

What follows admits us more directly into their familiar relations, and reveals the sign by which the Cardinal had recognised the most confident and witty of his *protégés*.

"He had great delight many times with rough speech to his suitors, to prove, but without harm, what prompt wit and what bold spirit were in every man. In the which, as in a virtue much agreeing with his nature, so that therewith were not joined impudence, he took great delectation." The future Chancellor of Henry VIII. was to have occasion later to make use of this kind of excellence, but no longer with the same commendation. More continues: "In his speech he was fine, eloquent, and pithy. In the law he had profound knowledge, in wit he was incomparable, and in memory wonderful excellent."[1]

[1] *Utopia* (Robinson's translation).

His example in all these matters, the last among them, was destined to bear fruit.[1]

## III

"*Infinitum, mi Dorpi, fuerit explicare, quam multa desunt ei cui Græca desunt*" ("'Twould be an infinite task, dear Dorpius, to explain how much he lacks who lacks Greek").[2] That statement shows the ambition with which the boy More, then aged fourteen, set out for Oxford. The Cardinal had had no difficulty in finding his page a place there, and Sir John More had consented to the step, though with certain conditions. The Oxford of 1492, the Oxford of Grocyn and Linacre, was to every Englishman the city of Greek. On his return from Bologna, where he had been admitted Doctor, a monk of Canterbury, named Sellyng, had opened a Greek class near the abbey; then, taking his best pupil, Thomas Linacre, with him, he had returned to Italy and left him in

[1] Mr Hutton further ascribes to the Cardinal's influence More's robust faith in the Catholicity of the Church. Morton, he says, was one of the Archbishops who taught men to forget the claim of the English Primate to be *alterius orbis papa* (p. 9). I need not enter here into the question whether, in so doing, Morton was breaking, as Mr Hutton says, with "an ancient national tradition."

[2] *Ad Dorp.* 40 E. This letter to Dorpius may be found, with other letters of More's, at the end of the London edition of the letters of Erasmus. Other letters are collected in vol. iii. of Jortin's *Erasmus* (edition of 1808). For Erasmus's letters I have gone as a general rule to the London edition.

the hands of Politian. Linacre was Thomas More's tutor; and thus we have a clear view of the torch of the Renaissance passing from hand to hand, from the master of Giovanni de Medici to the master of Thomas More.[1]

But it was a far cry from the gardens of Lorenzo the Magnificent to the poor chambers of Oxford. The ardour of study was the same; but at Oxford life remained grave, all but monastic. The coming of the Renaissance in England was marked by no frivolity, no revival of paganism. Moreover, Sir John More had taken precautions against his son's indulging in any pleasures beyond the study of Aristotle.[2] He had no pocket-money. For the most insignificant and most necessary expenses he must write to London. "It was thus," he would say, "that I indulged in no vice or pleasure, and spent my time in no vain or hurtful amusements; I did not know what luxury meant, and never learnt to use money badly; in a word, I loved and thought of nothing but my studies."[3] That is all the exact information we have on our hero's university career. A reference by Richard Pace, his contemporary, and himself a brilliant humanist, gives us some idea of his method of work. "Here I will remark that no one ever lived who did not first ascertain the meaning of words, and from them gather the meaning of the sentences which they compose—no one, I say, with

[1] Cf. Dom Gasquet, *The Old English Bible*, Essay IX.

[2] More himself says in his letter to Dorpius that Linacre expounded Aristotle to him.

[3] B. i. 10.

one single exception, and that is our own Thomas More. For he is wont to gather the force of the words from the sentences in which they occur, especially in his study and translation of Greek. This is not contrary to grammar, but above it, and an instinct of genius."[1] It is also, we may add, characteristic of an amateur. In fact, More never had the time to become a professional scholar. He appears, moreover, to have had more aptitude for Greek than for Latin. According to Erasmus, he owed the supple elegance we admire in his writings to nothing but dogged application. He spoke Latin, of course, as fluently as his mother-tongue. He knew also "French, arithmetic, and geometry," devoured all the books on history that came into his hands, and played becomingly on the flute and viol.

At the end of two years his father summoned him back to London. The judge was afraid the love of Greek might turn the young man from the career he had chosen for him. More obeyed the summons. In February 1496, he was admitted of Lincoln's Inn as a student of law. He was then eighteen. Here again he soon distinguished himself. He was called to the bar in 1501, and was shortly afterwards appointed three years in succession as lecturer to the students and minor persons of the Palace, a mark of esteem which led to his being selected later to interpret the law before his colleagues of the bar and before the judges themselves (1511). In 1504 he entered Parliament.

[1] B. i. 12.

## IV

There is no need to linger in the courts of justice. The real More is not to be found there. Like many others, he devoted the best of his time to work he did not care for; but, thorough Englishman that he was, he was always able to withdraw at a given moment from his professional career and return to himself. We will rejoin him in his real life with all the speed we may.

No better moment could be found, for it was now that the young man, whose only duty it had been so far to let himself be led, began to enjoy the full liberty of choosing his own course. His first proceeding was to look for a room close to the Charter House in London, where he might live in meditation and prayer. So far as he could he followed the offices of his neighbours. The rest of his leisure was spent in study. The very few friends he had made were no distraction from work and from thought on God. We know their names: Colet, the Dean of St Paul's, whom he had taken for his confessor; the Hellenist, Grocyn, rector of St Lawrence Jewry; the other great Hellenist of the day, Linacre, More's old tutor, who had also returned to the capital; and finally, and in the absence of Erasmus, who was the dearest of all, William Lilly, the young and attractive scholar, who, after his Oxford years, had gone to perfect his Greek in the Isle of Rhodes. Lilly was living actually in

the Charter House, and thus, being next door to each other, they met frequently. For practice, as they said, the two friends amused themselves by translating epigrams from the *Anthologia* into Latin verse; and their respective versions were published together in the same book, with the charming title of *Progymnasmata Thomae Mori et Gulielmi Lilii sodalium.*

But the *Anthologia* was not Thomas More's usual reading. The Fathers of the Church, and especially St Augustine, interested him more, and he even gave a course of lectures on the *de Civitate Dei* in the church of St Lawrence, which Grocyn had placed at his disposal.

The ardent and rigid figure of Dean Colet is worth lingering over. As with nearly all the great Catholic reformers, attempts have been made to rob us of him, and Mr Seebohm has employed for the purpose an audacity of conjecture which is no part of a historian's equipment. But it has yet to be demonstrated that because a man admits that abuses have crept into the life of the Church, because he deplores them and combats them, he is therefore of necessity a Lutheran. For all his somewhat anxious temperament and slightly obstinate mind, the Dean of St Paul's was a priest of great sanctity, who never either did or wrote a single thing that could justify a doubt of the perfect orthodoxy of his faith. If some of his brethren attacked him fiercely as an innovator, there were others, as many in number and of indisputable authority, who remained faithful to him throughout; and More himself proves that Colet's

name was not, in fact, that of a suspect, when, in his letter to a monk who was strongly opposed to the new ideas, he praises Longland by simply calling him another Colet: "*Alter, ut eius laudes uno verbo complectar, Coletus.*" [1]

In other respects the natural affinities between Colet and Thomas More were but distant. They were united by the same Christian ideas and the same taste for letters. Colet was one of the few preachers More could endure; and, last but not least, the young barrister, who was then passing through a critical period, was indebted to his confessor for much kindness, wisdom, and decision. More was at that time considering whether he ought not to renounce the world entirely, and it was probably on Colet's advice that he gave up all idea of a religious vocation.

It was Erasmus who, in summing up in one word the history of that crisis, let loose, in all innocence, the imagination of Thomas More's biographers. Obviously, I do not include Father Bridgett and Mr Hutton, but the sober Nisard has been caught out in a solemn blunder. "At twenty years of age," he writes, "the voice of the senses begins to be heard. In spite of his habitual austerity, his poverty, and his ardour for work, the Oxford scholar (*he had left Oxford two years before*) was disturbed by unknown desires." [2] He continues complacently in that strain till he reaches this exquisitely tasteful conclusion: "The young man, however, had defeat in prospect.

[1] Jortin, *Erasmus*, iii. 383.
[2] *Études sur la Renaissance*, p. 163.

Two means of escaping it were always open to him —a monastery and marriage. His conscience was offended at the thought of a monastery; within its walls he would have been disgusted, or perhaps tempted by evil example. Marriage attracted him, in spite of the epigrams he had made on women; and he took refuge from profligacy in a holy union." [1]

And now to return to Erasmus. The brusque simplicity of his statement tastes better than this mixture of vulgarity and sickliness. What the recipient of Thomas More's confidence says is: "*Maluit igitur maritus esse castus quam sacerdos impurus.*" [2] The first impression these words convey is that More, being uncertain of his strength, and also not feeling himself clearly called to a more perfect life, decided to live as a Christian in a state of wedlock rather than make a bad priest. And that, in fact, is the truth of his story. For some time he thought seriously of becoming a Franciscan; then he gave up the idea for the simple reason that I have just stated. It is really a puerile proceeding to build up all this romance of "unknown desires" [3] on such a foundation; and we reach the acme of nonsense with M. Nisard when he asks us to see in Thomas More a "Christian who found the cloister too mild to confine his rebellious youth." [4]

[1] *Études sur la Renaissance*, p. 167.

[2] In the famous letter to Ulrich von Hutten, to which we shall return.

[3] Father Bridgett says in this connection: "That was a matter for More himself and his confessor." That is to write like a gentleman.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 185.

Others, still starting from the words of Erasmus, have gone further than Nisard, or at least have expatiated at greater length on the monastic corruption which they suppose to have compelled More to resign himself, as a last resource, to marriage. I am content to confine my answer to the words of an Anglican historian: "It is absurd to assert that More was disgusted with monastic corruption—that he 'loathed monks as a disgrace to the Church.' He was throughout his life a warm friend of the religious orders, and a devoted admirer of the monastic ideal. He condemned the vices of individuals; he said, as his great-grandson says, 'that at that time religious men in England had somewhat degenerated from their ancient strictness and fervour of spirit'; but there is not the slightest sign that his decision to decline the monastic life was due in the smallest degree to a distrust of the system or a distaste for the theology of the Church." [1]

Briefly, in the spring of 1505 Thomas More married. He certainly never dreamed when he did so that so natural a step would one day let loose such a flood of sour ink. I shall come soon to the delightful story of his betrothal to Jane Colt; but before closing this chapter on the youth of Thomas More, we must pause for a moment on a work to which he devoted himself during the first year of his married life, and in which he seems to have wished to sum up for his own use the best lessons of the Renaissance.

[1] Hutton, pp. 27, 28.

## V

The work I mean is a little book that appeared in 1510, with the following old-world title: *The life of Johan Picus Erle of Myrandula, a great Lorde of Italy, an excellent connyng man in all sciences, and vertuous of liuing: with diuers epistles and other workes of ye sayd Johan Picus, full of greate science, vertue, and wisedome: whose life and woorkes bene worthy and digne to be read, and often to be had in memory. Translated out of latin into Englishe by maister Thomas More.*

I am quite aware that the name of Pico della Mirandola stands to most people for that of a swash-buckler of dogmatism, and that the young scholar has paid heavily with us for the swaggering titles of his theses. But our misprision is unjust. Looked at a little closer, Pico della Mirandola is still to-day what he was to his contemporaries, the hero, the Prince Charming of the Renaissance. When this pilgrim of universal knowledge, "not unlike," as Pater says, "the archangel Raphael . . . or Mercury, as he might have appeared in a painting by Sandro Botticelli," entered that famous chamber where a lamp burned day and night before the bust of Plato, Ficino, that old pagan, "seems to have thought there was something not wholly earthly about him; at least, he ever afterwards believed that it was not without the co-operation of the stars that the stranger had arrived on that

day."[1] Ficino was captured like every one else, and they fell at once into an intimate and serious conversation. Ficino himself has related, in a dedication to Lorenzo de Medici, the story of his fascination, and how the visit determined him to undertake the translation of Plotinus. Let it be remembered further that the cell of the prior of St Mark's saw just another such scene. Savonarola loved the young prince dearly. He would have liked to make him one of his monks; and though that joy was denied him he at least had the sweet and mournful honour of burying his disciple's body in the hood and white frock of the Dominican order.

This double friendship supplies a happy symbol of the philosophy of Pico and Thomas More. Ficino and Savonarola, the Christian asceticism that could go courageously even to the "folly of the Cross," and a kind of exaltation of humanity that threatened a return to paganism—these two extreme tendencies meet in Christian humanism and mingle into harmony. More had not the leisure to set forth in didactic form this reconciliation of Plato and the Gospels, and if he had set hand to the work, he would never, solid Englishman that he was, have brought nearer to earth the adventurous and sometimes *bizarre* mysticism of Pico della Mirandola; but the kinship between the two minds, the two souls, is plain. "Like the Italian humanist," says Mr Hutton, "More was penetrated with the sense of the beauty and the mystery of life. Rich colours and the strange recesses of occult investigation, the

[1] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance, Pico della Mirandola.*

quaintness of old-world learning, and the pure human beauty of classic ideals of literature and art, the thrilling chords of music and the simple innocence of animal life, the triumph of self-sacrifice, the joys of friendship and of love, the thoughts of Plato and the divine mysteries of the Christian religion, appealed each in their turn to his sensitive consciousness, and ascetic though he was his inner contemplation never blinded him to the loveliness of human life. Pico was as far removed from the ignorant bigotry satirized in the Letters of obscure men as from the scarce veiled Paganism of many disciples of the New Learning. To him it did not seem that Christianity was less true because Paganism was so beautiful, and the same thought was never absent from the mind of More." [1]

I must crave the reader's indulgence if he finds that this first chapter leaves him still in the clouds. Greek and legal procedure, Erasmus and Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino and Savonarola, the Renaissance and Catholic reform, all these suggestions packed into twenty pages cannot fail to give more smoke than light. The writer, no doubt, is to blame; but the fault lies to some extent in the subject too. If it is impossible to define the simplest of living souls exactly, how can we hope to understand so rich and diverse a nature so early in its career, when it is but just emerging from the confusion of youthful years? And there is more; the most perplexing of the antinomies we have propounded, antinomies which still weigh on us

[1] Hutton, p. 35.

after a lapse of four centuries, are not those that can be resolved into clear formulas. *Solvitur ambulando.* By contemplating Thomas More as he lived, we shall the better understand how a Christian can renounce nothing of what is nobly "human," and still remain faithful to the "hard words" of the Gospel.

# CHAPTER II

## ERASMUS AND THOMAS MORE

A scholar brotherhood, high-souled and complete (J. C. Shairp, *A Remembrance*).

Erasmus, my darling, is my dear darling still (More, *Dial.*, p. 422).

Ab aliis persuasi credunt, plus ab ea ipsa (Moria) dictum, quam dictum sit: alioqui fors non succensuri, si ea ipsa quae dicuntur *ipsi* intelligerent (Mori *ad Dorpium*, p. 41 B).

I HAVE already mentioned that the contemporaries of Thomas More's youth liked to associate his name with that of Erasmus. At this distance of time such a conjunction is a constant surprise and source of anxiety. If there had been nothing between these two humanists but a close bond of friendship, Greek, strictly speaking, might explain everything. But that loophole is closed to us. On both sides the sympathy was full and entire. No amount of searching will reveal one single line of More that could be construed as containing the slightest disavowal of the work and thought of Erasmus. On the contrary, there are many passages, and those decisive, in which the future martyr adopts all his friend's thoughts and defends them out and out. What course are we to take? Must we surrender the author of *The Praise of Folly* to the Protestants or the Freethinkers, and with

him thirty years and more of the intellectual life of Thomas More? If the facts demand it, we will make the sacrifice, however heavy. Or, on the other hand, are we to join the early biographers of More in an attempt to establish a quarrel between the two friends on the earliest possible opportunity, and conjure up at all costs some means of separating them? We are prepared to do that too, on the understanding that justice and truth allow it. But in any case we must give them a hearing before we judge them. They have both taken us into their confidence, and if one of them seems a little too elusive, the other, and the only one to interest us directly in this chapter, offers a transparent sincerity. I am aware, too, that an unauthoritative biographer would be ill-advised to attempt to conduct so delicate an interrogatory on his own account, and mean to confine myself to following step by step the proceedings of two masters whose knowledge and orthodoxy are unquestioned, Dom Gasquet, the Primate of the English Benedictines,[1] and Father Bridgett, the official biographer of Blessed Thomas More.

## II

Erasmus, as every one knows, spent several fairly long periods in England. His first visit took place in 1497, when More was beginning his second year

[1] Dom Gasquet has devoted a long chapter of his *Eve of the Reformation* to Erasmus.

of the law. Erasmus was some ten years older than the young student. They met probably at the house of William Blount, Lord Mountjoy, who had been a pupil of the already famous humanist's in Paris. Erasmus soon left London for Oxford, but from the tone of the letters he wrote at that time to More, it is clear that a firm and affectionate friendship was beginning between them. They could meet, too, from time to time. One day when Erasmus was resting at Lord Mountjoy's country house, More came to see him and proposed to take him to the next village. There they found the whole of Henry VII.'s family with the exception of prince Arthur. The king's children gave them audience in great state, Henry, aged nine, but already possessed with a sense of his own importance, two little princesses, and a child in the nurse's arms. "More," writes Erasmus, ". . . after saluting prince Henry, presented him with I know not what writing. As I was entirely taken by surprise I had nothing to offer, and I was obliged to make a promise that I would write something to show my respect. I was somewhat vexed with More for not warning me, and especially so since the prince while we were dining sent me a note asking some fruit of my pen. I went home and in spite of the Muses, from whom I had long been separated, I finished my poem within three days." [1]

Prince Henry we shall meet again. Meanwhile Erasmus, on his return to the Continent, praised his

[1] B. i. 39, 40. The scene took place between February 1499 and January 1500.

English friends to the skies: the kindness of Prior Charnock, his Oxford host, the learning of Colet, and the "suavity" of More.

Towards the end of 1505 he crossed the Channel again. This time he went straight to More's. More had been married for some months, and his house was assiduously frequented by an academy of Hellenists—Colet, Grocyn, Linacre, and Lilly. The delight of the band of scholars may easily be imagined. In their ardour for work, and with a view to tempering their "humour" anew at a good spring, the two friends made use of the interval to turn several dialogues of Lucian into Latin. More chose the most caustic, and, not to neglect his profession of barrister too completely, occupied himself in writing a declamation on tyrannicide in imitation of the same author. He wished Erasmus to follow his example. "If he bade me to dance on the tight-rope," said Erasmus, "I should obey without a murmur." And he published his declamation with a preface in which More is not forgotten. "Unless my ardent love blinds me, nature never made any one so ready of wit, so keen-sighted, so shrewd. His intellect is equalled by his power of speech; and his suavity is so great, his humour so keen yet so innocuous, that he has every quality of a perfect advocate." Coming down to detail, he adds the following lines, which we feel to be very just: "The style of his oratory approaches more the structure and dialectic subtlety of Isocrates than the limpid stream of Cicero, although in urbanity he is in no way inferior to Tully. He paid so much attention

in his youth to writing poetry, that you may now discern the poet in his prose compositions." [1]

We have now reached the critical moment, the year 1508, in which Erasmus returned once more to England, and again came to stay with Thomas More. Some weeks later, while he was riding in difficult country at the mercy of his mule, he was seized with an idea which struck him as a splendid find. He communicated it to his host. More was not the man to throw cold water on any project of the kind; he encouraged Erasmus, egged him on, prompted him with a few jests of his own, until at length, by the end of a few weeks, *The Praise of Folly* was finished. The very title of the famous little book, the *Encomium Moriae*, set a seal, so to speak, on the literary brotherhood of the two friends, and stood for a pleasant reminder that the work had been written under Thomas More's roof and in collaboration, of a kind, with the future author of *Utopia*.

Collaboration, we say; but More was not content with encouraging Erasmus and defending him. In the campaign of which *The Praise of Folly* is the most famous episode, he stood shoulder to shoulder with his friend and fired a shot himself. The pamphlet he composed has all the biting wit and the dashing attack of the *Moria* itself. In 1516, before the outburst of Luther, he still declared that for his own part he could not have wished the suppression of a single line of Erasmus's epigrams against the monks,[2] and about the same time he himself was

[1] B. i. 82, 83.

[2] "Non miror nil in eis reperisse te quod mutari velles, *sicuti nec ego certe*" (*Ad Dorpium*, 41 F).

indulging in a few piquant anecdotes on the same theme. Devout as he was and singularly attached to the Blessed Virgin, he was merciless in ridiculing certain devotions which he judged superstitious, though it may be noted that in all these matters his touch is more delicate and lighter than that of Erasmus.[1]

Their friendship continued without a cloud. In 1517 More was languishing, a reluctant ambassador, at Calais. Erasmus and Peter Giles sent him their portraits, just finished by Quentin Matsys, from Antwerp. "Peter," wrote Erasmus, "pays one-half of the cost, and I the other. Either of us would gladly have paid the whole, but we wished the gift to be from both."[2] More was delighted, and replied with an outburst of affection. "You cannot believe, my Erasmus, my darling Erasmus (the *erasmiotatos* is untranslatable), how this eagerness of yours to bind me still more closely to you, has heightened my love for you. . . . You know me so well that I need not labour to prove to you that, with all my faults, I am no great boaster. Yet, to tell the truth, there is one craving for glory I cannot shake off, and it is wonderful how sweetly I am elated when the thought occurs to me that I shall be commended to the most distant ages by the friendship, the letters, the books, the pictures of Erasmus."[3] The year before, More had written his famous letter to Dorpius in defence of *The Praise of Folly*. In 1520 appeared

[1] I do not refer, of course, to his Latin, which is not so good as his friend's.

[2] B. i. 109.

[3] B. i. 109, 110.

his letter to a monk who had sent him certain vile slanders against Erasmus. But he was already absorbed by affairs of State, and soon afterwards by the struggle against Protestantism. The two friends, however, did not lose sight of each other; they continued to correspond, and always in the same tone, and we shall see before long how, even in his struggle with the Lutherans, More remained sensitive to every attack on Erasmus's orthodoxy, and claimed that quality stoutly for his "dear darling."

## III

In its main lines, the history of this famous friendship is known. It is both sad and amusing to see how usually serious and sincere biographers have fallen victims to the temptation to attenuate or amplify the facts, so as to fit them to their wishes. So legends are born. Stapleton, who was a staunch Catholic controversialist in the campaign against Protestantism, is unable to stomach the idea that More can have remained a friend of Erasmus. To him, as to nearly all his contemporaries, Erasmus is nothing but a forerunner of Luther, and therefore, by one of those unconscious sophisms of which we are all capable, he will have it that, sooner or later, his hero must have arrived at the same conclusion. "Their common devotion to letters," he writes, "was the cause of More's having a greater affection for Erasmus than for any one; and Erasmus justly returned it to the full. The friendship, however, was rather honourable to

Erasmus than beneficial to More, and in proportion as the heresy hatched from the terrible egg laid by Erasmus grew bigger, More's affection diminished little by little and continued to cool." Every word of that is clearly cut to pattern—the pattern of legend. What says history? "In the interests of truth," says Father Bridgett, "I must declare at the outset that I cannot find the very slightest foundation for the assertion of Stapleton, copied by Cresacre More and many others, that in the course of time their friendship cooled. Abundant proofs of the contrary will appear as we proceed."[1] Stapleton insists on it. Vague rumour gives him ground for the statement that More implored his friend to publish a book of retractations, and that Erasmus, not content with neglecting his advice, took care to destroy the compromising letter. *Nec has Mori litteras superesse passus est.* The ingenuity of this rash conclusion is undeniable, but there is better still to follow. In a book he published towards the end of his life, at the height of the Protestant agitation, More expressed himself clearly on the subject of Erasmus. That, beyond question, is the place in which to look for his last word. Stapleton does not ignore it. He prints the passage in his book; but, in consequence of the involuntary blindness we have mentioned, he either did not see, or perhaps forgot, the last lines, which happen to be a decisive profession of affection and confidence.

"For had I found," writes More, "with Erasmus my darling the shrewd intent and purpose that I

[1] B. i. 39.

find in Tyndale, Erasmus my darling *should be* no more my darling."

Stapleton purposely stops at the conditional, which seems to open the door to conjecture. The phrase and the thought of More ended thus:—

"But I find in Erasmus my darling that he detesteth and abhorreth the errors and heresies that Tyndale plainly teacheth and abideth by, and therefore Erasmus my darling *shall be* my dear darling still."[1] Cresacre More, too, takes good care not to quote the whole passage. He even heightens it, and either—good-naturedly or acutely—changes the meaning of the phrase by changing the tenses of the verbs: "If my darling Erasmus *hath* translated[2] . . . he *shall be* no more my darling."

But these little liberties taken with the truth bring no advantage to their authors; Stapleton's clumsy apology all but succeeds in compromising his hero. To say that later in life More threw off his infatuation and broke with a dangerous friend is to insinuate, or at any rate to leave room for supposing, that their early relations had not been entirely free from imprudence. Nothing more was needed to let loose the imagination of another category of biographers.

Here we come upon the birth of a new legend, the legend of Thomas More, the doubting and dissatisfied Catholic whose faith was under suspicion, and no less than Erasmus, a forerunner of Protestantism. "The young ascetic," writes Nisard,

[1] *English Works*, p. 422.

[2] Pp. 111, 112.

"the Christian who had found the cloister too mild to confine his rebellious youth, the polemic writer who was going to defend the cause of Catholicism with such ardour, had experienced that slackening of the opinions, that failing of the spirit through which we all pass about that age" (a historian should not be in such haste to credit a Christian of 1510 with the sentiments through which "we pass" in the nineteenth century), "and which make us tolerant in matters of religion, intelligent and moderate in our judgment on all subjects, unimpassioned reformers, and as reserved in negation as in affirmation. In proclaiming liberty of religion in *Utopia*, Morus comes nearer to philosophic doubt than to the Roman faith. His mind had been sweetened without being corrupted by his occupation with public affairs, and by his knowledge of human interests, and glory, which disposes men to benevolence. His tolerance was no more than a just view of things, a kindly philosophy founded on Christian humanity. . . ."

It would be impossible to caress one's own image more fondly, for, as a matter of fact, not one of these features bears the slightest resemblance to Thomas More. Henry VIII.'s chancellor was certainly "tolerant," more tolerant than any, but by no means in the sense claimed for him under the reign of Louis Philippe. Merely from the point of view of criticism, we should need triple evidence before ascribing to such a man, and even to Erasmus, the lukewarm and infinitely diluted Christianity which Nisard thinks to honour him by claiming for him.

The portrait, such as it is, is a pure invention, and all this psychology springs from a simple logical deduction. Erasmus was a sceptic: More was devoted to Erasmus: therefore More was a sceptic. "These two men," concludes Nisard, "touch and agree at all points. The prudence of Erasmus takes on in Morus's eyes the colour of his own tolerance. His leaning towards doubt meets in Morus a drowsy faith which is only to be woken by the resounding voice of Luther. Let Luther hurl his words, so soon to turn to swords, into the world of Christendom, and Morus and Erasmus, till then so clearly joined in love, *will be less devoted* (here speaks Stapleton). Erasmus will say of Morus that, if there is anything in religious matters he inclines to, it is rather superstition than religion: Morus will hold of Erasmus that if he refuses active and incessant controversy with Luther it is because he has a secret leaning towards heresy." [1]

Really, we are at a loss for words when we find a perfectly honest man in all good faith writing like this. For the fact is that it is all flagrant invention. I have already quoted the formal statement by which More defends his friend from all suspicion of heresy. It is true that a letter of his, written in 1526, betrays some slight anxiety, on account not of the orthodoxy, but of the courage of Erasmus, who seemed just then hesitating to publish the second volume of a promised work against Luther. And, moreover, this letter, which is a beautiful piece of work, is of the kind that a man addresses only to his

[1] Pp. 186, 187.

intimate, his most intimate friends.[1] As to the supposed expression of Erasmus, Nisard is particularly unfortunate. The letter in which, no doubt, he believed himself to have found it, is entirely devoted to the praise and defence of More. More had just retired into private life, and the Protestants were tearing his name to pieces. Erasmus has no trouble in showing that the Chancellor had not evaded his duty in his treatment of heretics. "More detests these seditious doctrines (*i.e.* Luther's) which are now so lamentably disturbing the world. He makes no mystery of his sentiments on that point, for he is so given to piety that if he leaned in the least degree to one side or the other, it would be in the direction of superstition rather than impiety."[2] Writers are at liberty to indulge in psychological fantasies about these two men as much as they please, but they must give up all hope of summoning them as witnesses against each other. They loved each other, understood each other, and championed each other to the end.

## IV

They cannot be separated; no sooner is one on his trial than the other takes his place beside him, and one verdict must condemn or acquit them both. The charge against them is that they paved the way for the rebellion of Luther by too much activity in

[1] B. i. 277-79.

[2] "Sic addictus pietati ut si in alterutram partem aliquantulum inclinet momentum, superstitioni quam impietati vicinior esse videatur" (London edition, p. 1505, B. i. 246).

the war against the abuses the Church then suffered from. What have they to say in their defence?

They call witnesses. If Erasmus were the only prisoner, he would only have to repeat that up till the very end, up till martyrdom, Thomas More, his friend of more than thirty years, had continued to extend him his friendship and his confidence. But we need other witnesses than More himself, and I know none in the whole century of more authority than the saintly Bishop Fisher. He too, no doubt, was a personal friend, but the friendship of such a man is in itself a presumption of the prisoner's innocence. "Fisher," says Father Bridgett, "was always thoroughly convinced of the sincerity of the attachment of Erasmus to the Church."[1] It is well known that he had decided to take him as his theologian in the Council of Lateran. He strongly approved and encouraged the labours of the Christian humanist on the Scriptures and the Fathers. Erasmus, for his part, wrote to the saintly bishop with the fullest freedom and confidence. He broaches in this letter, and very vigorously, the subject of the abuses which both observed in the Church. He feels that to him he may open his heart without reticence. May it not be that that is where we should look for the real Erasmus, for his inmost soul? Here we have no more frivolity or sarcasm, there is nothing to tempt him to reveal and exaggerate the less lofty tendencies of his nature; and we are seized with affectionate gratitude and admiration at the thought of the great man who

[1] Bridgett, *Life of Blessed John Fisher*, p. 101

gave ear to the daring reformer, and in so doing compelled him to purify his zeal and moderate the vivacity of his attack. Many other English bishops, and some of the most famous, Wolsey, Warham, Fox, and Tunstall, thought and acted in the same way.

*The Praise of Folly* dates from 1508. Twice, in 1511 and 1513, the author of this hotly discussed little book was appointed Professor of Theology at Cambridge. "The electing body," as Sir Richard Jebb points out, "was the whole Faculty of Theology, regulars as well as seculars. . . . If Erasmus was not universally acceptable to the schoolmen or to the monks of Cambridge, at any rate the general respect for his character and attainments carried the day."[1] "His labours gained him the support and approbation of many of the holiest and most learned bishops of the Continent."[2] Finally, not to mention Leo X., who enjoyed the *Moria* more than any one, there were other Popes, Adrian VI., Clement VII., and Paul III., who lavished attentions on Erasmus, some, no doubt, a little disconcerting, but all marks of affection and confidence; and everybody knows that Thomas More's friend might, if he had liked, have died a Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church.

Moreover, about that time the word "reform" was so far from being what it was soon to become with Luther, a synonym for rebellion, that it was constantly on the lips or the pens of the most

[1] Jebb, *Erasmus*, Rede Lecture.
[2] Bridgett, *J. Fisher*, p. 101.

saintly and orthodox men. The Church would be neither divine nor living were she not constantly concerned with her own reformation; and it is a gratuitous insult to credit heresy with the monopoly of this continually necessary process. There is no need to repeat here the reasons which made this necessity more urgent on the morrow of the great schism and the dawn of the modern era. All we are concerned to remember now is that, with the exception of a few reactionaries, the whole world was agreed on the foundation of the dispute.

Froude himself has said as much: "You cannot understand the sixteenth century till you recognise the immense difference then present in the minds of men between a change of doctrine and a reformation of the Church's manners and morals."[1] No doubt the excessive haste and self-conceit of some of those who denounced the abuses laid them open to the danger of setting themselves before the Church, and it is only natural that in the smoke of the first battles the heretics of the morrow and the Catholics of all time should seem indistinguishable. "It is quite possible," says Father Bridgett—and there is nothing out of the question in the idea—"that had Fisher and Colet, Luther and Erasmus, met together at the house of Sir Thomas More in 1512, they would have conversed on the state of the Church and of the world with a seemingly cordial unanimity."[2]

The future, however, was to reveal the secret and

[1] Froude, *Life and Letters of Erasmus*, Lecture XIV.
[2] Bridgett, *Fisher*, p. 103.

incurable antagonism which thenceforth separated the Reformers; and though Erasmus is still a bone of contention, it is quite clear that a decided Catholic like More believed him to be as faithful and staunch as Colet or Fisher. Not a word did he speak or write that could justify his being set down a rebel. Erasmus, says Father Gasquet, was "keenly alive to the spiritual wants of the age," but "is often perhaps injudicious in the manner in which he advocated reforms. But when the matter is sifted to the bottom, it will commonly be found that his ideas are just."[1] That was More's opinion too; and as for excess and imprudence in polemics, he felt himself as guilty as his friend, and joined him in pleading extenuating circumstances.

He begins by recalling the extraordinary violence, injustice, and even—the word is not too strong—the madness of the attacks he was daily subjected to. From the throne of Christianity, Erasmus's *New Testament* was denounced as one of the signs of the coming of Antichrist. Queen Catherine's confessor, a Dominican bishop, declared to his penitent that in correcting St Jerome, Erasmus had committed an unpardonable crime.[2] The name of St Jerome was ill chosen, and More, forgetting his usual moderation, wrote: "The labours of Jerome were ruined by the same plagues as now attack the labours of Erasmus, the envy and the ignorance of those whom he wished to serve."[3] Not only was

[1] Gasquet, *The Eve of the Reformation*, pp. 155, 156.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 178.
[3] Jortin, *Erasmus*, vol. iii. 373.

all critical study of the Bible and the Fathers denounced; Greek itself became an accursed language, and all the Hellenists sold to the devil. One day a theologian preached a sermon before Henry VIII. in which he fulminated against the study of Greek. Richard Pace, one of those whom it most concerned, was sitting next to Thomas More. Pace looked at the king to see how he was taking it, and seeing him smile, knew that Greek would win the day. When the sermon was over, the theologian was summoned to the king's presence and compelled to defend his statements against Thomas More, who was charged with the defence of the Greek language. The contest was too unequal. Defeated out of hand, the unhappy preacher fell on his knees for pardon, declaring that he believed himself to have followed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The king asked him if he had read the writings of Erasmus. He was obliged to confess that he had not. "Then," said the king, "by this you prove your folly, in condemning what you have not read." It was often thus, and as Erasmus sadly remarks, "This . . . I generally find to be the case, that none are more bitter in their outcry than they who do not read what I write."[1] The heat of these battles is still only too evident in More's famous letter to the University of Oxford :—

"When in London he had heard of a faction at Oxford calling themselves Trojans, either out of hatred of Greek studies or from love of fun. . . . These Trojans were accustomed to jeer at and

[1] Gasquet, *The Eve of the Reformation*, pp. 177, 178.

otherwise molest all the students of Greek. He had thought these were merely the regrettable follies of young men; but . . . he has found that the folly is growing into madness, and that one of these Trojans, a man wise in his own esteem and merry in the judgment of others, but who must be counted insane by all who consider his conduct, has in a public sermon, in the sacred time of Lent, raved not only against Greek literature and Latin culture, but most liberally against all liberal arts. . . . What greater infamy could be offered to the function of the preacher than that the preacher himself, in the holiest time of the year, before a great assembly of Christian men, in the very temple of God, . . . in the presence of the venerable Body of Christ, should turn a Lenten sermon into a Bacchanalian farce? As to his attack on all secular studies, if the good man had long withdrawn from the world and spent years in the desert, and suddenly coming from his solitude, had urged his hearers to give themselves to watching, prayer, and fasting, saying that by such means only could they gain heaven, and that all the rest was but trifling; that the study of literature was the forging of fetters, and that the rude and unlearned fly to heaven unhindered; from such a preacher such a sermon might have been endured. His simplicity might have gained him pardon; some kind hearers might have called it sanctity, and even those who liked it least might have excused it as piety and devotion. But here they see a man ascend the pulpit elegantly dressed with a furred mantle, and

the insignia of a man of learning, and there, in the midst of a university to which no one comes except for the sake of learning, openly rail against almost every kind of literature. Who can deem this anything but mere malice and envy? How came it into his head to preach about the Latin tongue, of which he knows but little; or the liberal sciences, which he knows still less; or about Greek, of which he does not understand one iota? Had he not matter enough in the seven capital sins—matter, too, in which he is better skilled? . . .

"Will it be pretended that what he condemns is not literature, but the immoderate study of it? Surely that sin is not so common, or the rush of men so headlong towards study, that they need to be held back by a public sermon. . . . But the good man had no such moderate designs, for he openly called the students of Greek heretics, the professors he nicknamed big devils, and the disciples the devil's imps. And with this insane fury he pointed at a man (Erasmus) by the name of a devil whom all knew to be such that the real devil would be most loath to see him made a preacher."

We, in our turn, must be careful not to clap a Trojan helmet on all who in the battles of those days received the blows of our Hellenists. Erasmus somewhere complains that there was nothing in his books that his adversaries did not find offensive. "They see a scorpion under every stone; such and such a passage is suspect, such and such a line scandalous, such and such words wanting in reverence." In the same way, he and More possibly

saw Trojans everywhere; and in any case they were not careful enough in asking themselves whether some of the ridicule they poured out so copiously might not splash the devoted soldiers of the good cause and even the Church herself.

That is the great danger of all discussions from which wit is not excluded; and the severest of directors would no doubt have hesitated to forbid More or Erasmus to use their wit in their writings. At first sight it seems as if irony ought to be rigorously excluded from all Christian polemics, but in practice this redoubtable weapon will remain necessary so long as pure reason proves insufficient for the guidance of men and the removal of abuses. Their pens may have slipped now and then, but the two friends believed they might be satiric in all security of conscience. "Its satire," says Father Bridgett, speaking of the *Moria*, "is moderate compared with that of many previous writers whose faith and loyalty to the Church have never been called in question. Satire on ecclesiastical persons —whatever opinion we may form of it—must not be confounded with the ridicule cast by heretics on divine dogmas or institutions, or practices approved by the Church. There never was one day in his life when More would have applauded or tolerated an attack or a sneer at anything which he knew the Church to have countenanced. . . . Some years earlier a German named Sebastian Brant had written in German verse a book called *The Ship of Fools*. There had been no outcry against it. It had been at once translated into Latin, Dutch, French,

and English. A recent Scotch editor of this book, Mr Jamieson, writes: 'Brant can scarcely be classed in the great army of Protestant reformers. He was a reformer from within, a biting and unsparing exposer of every priestly abuse, but a loyal son of the Church.' . . . This seems to me to explain why More saw no harm or danger in the somewhat similar book of Erasmus when it first appeared. *The Ship of Fools* had been received with applause throughout Europe. It had even been taken as a text-book for sermons in Germany. . . . Why should a deeper book, written in Latin for more learned men, be pernicious or perilous? That it was judged and declared to be so by the Church more than fifty years later, proves what it had become, not what it was at its first appearance. Circumstances had totally changed, and it is often the circumstances in which a book is read that determine its weight. . . . And as a book may cease to be dangerous, so also it may become dangerous by change of times.

"When Erasmus wrote his *Praise of Folly*, the whole of Europe was Catholic; Luther's name was yet unknown except in Wittenberg, where he bore the character of a good Catholic. There was no prospect of heresy on any large scale, but among all good men there were hopes of a Catholic reformation. Whether the satire of Erasmus was likely to hasten it might well be doubted. More thought it would, and welcomed the book."[1]

There, indeed, we have the proof both of the

[1] B. i. 84, 85.

innocence of the pair, and of the presence of a certain amount of perspicacity in the various accusations brought against Erasmus. Some feared that his too vivacious criticism might serve the ends of some heretic and pave the way for an act of rebellion; others, convinced that the arch-heretic was already knocking at the door, maintained that the best means of delaying him or preventing his doing any harm was simply to set vigorously to work at reform. Both sides were right; and when the danger had broken out, Erasmus and More did not hesitate to recognise that they would have written differently if it had been granted them to know the future beforehand.

"I wrote the *Moria*," said Erasmus, "in times of peace; I should never have written it if I had foreseen this tempest."[1] He makes similar admissions elsewhere, but nowhere, I believe, more frankly than in his exquisite letter to the monk who wished to leave his monastery. "I fear that you are imposed upon by the trickery of certain people who nowadays go boasting mightily of the liberty of the gospel. Believe me, if you knew more of things, you would be less weary of your present life. I see a race of men arising from whom my mind turns with loathing. I see no one becoming better, every one becoming worse, so that I am deeply grieved that in my writings I once preached the liberty of the spirit, though I did so in all honesty, suspecting nothing so little as the appearance of people of this kind. What I desired then was that the abatement of external

[1] B. i. 86.

ceremonies might much redound to the increase of true piety. But as it is, the ceremonies have been so destroyed that in place of them we have not the liberty of the spirit but the unbridled licence of the flesh. . . . What liberty is that which forbids us to say our prayers, and forbids us the sacrifice of the Mass?" [1]

There was nothing is these retractations to surprise Thomas More; on the contrary, he warmly declares that neither suspicion nor direct attack can disarm him.

"Your enemies," he writes to Erasmus, "are all the less deserving of pardon, because they cannot be ignorant that you yourself confess frankly that you have handled certain subjects in a manner which, . . . had you been able to foresee the speedy appearance of these foes and traitors to religion, you would have endeavoured to soften and dilute. . . . He that would blame you for this, will find it no easy task to excuse some of the ancient doctors of the Church, . . . who, while applying the remedy to present ills, had no thought for the ills to come. . . . Go on, then, my Erasmus, and prosper in those your virtues; yet if aught should rouse the anxiety of some worthy soul beyond what need be, be not ashamed to temper your words to his pious fear." [2]

He himself, of course, showed an equal determination to sacrifice all his literary past to the pressing needs of the Church.

[1] London edition, Lib. xx., Epist. 18. The date of the letter is October 1527.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 1508.

"In these days," he writes again, "in which men, by their own default, misconstrue and take harm out of the very Scripture of God, until men better amend, if any man would now translate *Moria* into English, or some works either that I have myself written on this, albeit there be none harm therein, folk yet being (as they be) given to take harm of that that is good, I would not only my darling's books, but mine own also, help to burn them both with mine own hands, rather than folk should (though through their own fault) take any harm of them, seeing that I see them likely in these days so to do."[1]

Such words appear to me decisive. The man who wrote them manifestly was and always had been a faithful, loyal, and submissive son of the Church. As for his beloved Erasmus, we know now beyond question the opinion he had of him and the grounds on which he remained staunch in his friendship and confidence. In the Erasmus that he knew or thought he knew, the Erasmus that he loved, there was nothing, so far as questions of faith were concerned, of the Luther, the Bayle, the Voltaire, or the Renan. I am not concerned here to examine whether that was the real Erasmus, for the question has no bearing on the perfect orthodoxy of Thomas More. I will only remark that Henry VIII.'s Chancellor had a knowledge of men; that he saw Erasmus at close quarters, lived with him in complete intimacy, prayed with him; and that after an experience of thirty years, his testimony is possibly calculated to lessen

[1] *English Works*, pp. 422, 423.

the haste and increase the hesitation of those who, because they have read the *Moria* and a few of Erasmus's letters and colloquies, think they know him thoroughly and take it upon themselves to define him.

## CHAPTER III

### PRIVATE LIFE

It is clear that Sir Thomas had a little Utopia of his own in his family (Bridgett, i. p. 138).

IT is related that Hans Holbein the younger, fleeing the barbarity of the Swiss iconoclasts, found board, lodging, and a studio for some months in the house of Sir Thomas More. There is no documentary evidence in support of the picturesque legend, but it is certain that, on Erasmus's recommendation, More welcomed the artist with his usual kindness, found him work, and gave him every assistance in starting his career in the capital. It is easy to imagine that the two became friends, that More had a delighted and unwearying admiration for Holbein's simple, intellectual, and profound painting, and Holbein a vivid interest in More's interesting face, which was now full of kindness, now of gravity, now of irony. The painter's debt of gratitude and affection was paid royally. I have already spoken of his wonderful portrait of Thomas More; and the present chapter might be regarded as little more than a commentary on another famous picture, in which Holbein painted his friend's family. The picture, which was sent to Erasmus, has now disappeared and is possibly lost. There are a few more

or less imperfect copies remaining, and the first sketch, in pen and ink, is in the museum at Basle, with many other masterpieces by the same painter.

More is sitting on a cushioned seat in the middle of the room, with his father, the judge, on his right. Between the two and a little behind them, is a girl of fifteen, John More's betrothed, showing three-quarters of her pretty, pleasant, rather cold face. The old judge we have seen before; as to Thomas More, since all painting is untranslatable, let us call Erasmus to our aid. "To begin, then, with what is least known to you, in stature he is not tall, though not remarkably short. His limbs are formed with such perfect symmetry as to leave nothing to be desired. His complexion is white, his face fair rather than pale, and though by no means ruddy, a faint flush of pink appears beneath the whiteness of his skin. His hair is dark brown, or brownish black. The eyes are greyish blue, with some spots, a kind which betokens singular talent, and among the English is considered attractive. . . . His countenance is in harmony with his character, being always expressive of an amiable joyousness, and even an incipient laughter, and, to speak candidly, it is better framed for gladness than for gravity and dignity, though without any approach to folly or buffoonery. The right shoulder is a little higher than the left, especially when he walks. This is not a defect of birth, but the result of habit, such as we often contract. In the rest of his person there is nothing to offend. His hands are the least refined part of his body."

*Subrusticae:* Erasmus is the more conscious of that detail because his own hands were more delicate. Holbein, clearly, was of the same opinion. In the sketch, Thomas More's arms are resting on his knees, and his hands are buried in wide sleeves.

"I never saw any one," continues Erasmus, with an indiscretion worthy of an interviewer, "so indifferent about food. Until he was a young man he delighted in drinking water. . . . Yet not to seem singular or morose, he would hide his temperance from his guests by drinking out of a pewter vessel beer almost as light as water, or often pure water. It is the custom in England to pledge each other in drinking wine. In doing so he will merely touch it with his lips. He likes to eat corned beef and coarse bread much leavened, rather than what most people count delicacies. Otherwise, he has no aversion to what gives harmless pleasure to the body. He prefers milk diet and fruits, and is especially fond of eggs.

"His voice is neither loud nor very weak, but penetrating; not resounding or soft, but that of a clear speaker. Though he delights in every kind of music, he has no vocal talents.[1] He speaks with great clearness and perfect articulation, without rapidity or hesitation. He likes a simple dress, using neither silk nor purple nor gold chain, except when it may not be omitted. It is wonderful how negligent he is as regards all the ceremonious forms in which most men make politeness to consist. He

[1] Father Bridgett corrects Erasmus with the reminder that More used to sing with the choir in the church; unfortunately, that proves nothing!

does not require them from others, nor is he anxious to use them himself, . . . though he is not unacquainted with them when necessary. . . . By nature More is chary of his liberty and of ease, yet, though he enjoys ease, no one is more alert or patient when duty requires it."[1]

I confess that not all these characteristics can be detected in the appearance of the man whom Holbein has represented among his family, with his gold chain round his neck in honour of the occasion. But the chance was offered of quoting another and a minutely detailed piece of painting; and once begin quoting Erasmus, it is difficult to stop.

Holbein has grouped More's four children round their father. Next to him, on his left, stands John, the youngest, slightly bent over a book which he is holding in both hands. There has been some disagreement about this fair-haired head. An early editor of Roper found it foolish, while Mr Hutton is struck by its intelligent distinction. The question is difficult to settle, because the eyes are hidden, and still more so because we have no biographical information to help us. On the other hand, there is no chance of hesitation concerning the two young women sitting on very low stools at their father's feet. The younger of the two, Cecily, is turning her delicate head, no doubt towards the painter, in an alert and fixed attitude of interested curiosity. Her hands, which had been holding a book and apparently a garland of flowers or a string of beads, have parted suddenly, and the right is hanging lightly and grace-

[1] B. i. 56-58.

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fully in the air. All the intellectual vivacity of her father gleams in her little eyes and her smile. Margaret, the eldest and the favourite, looks graver. Her eyes, too, are very small, but they have the effect of increasing the size of the fine brow under the heavy geometrical head-dress. Like her father, she has a serious air, almost a look of tranquil resignation, which is equally far from sadness and joy. Elizabeth, the second daughter, is also grave, a sweet-looking girl with a delicate profile; she is standing on her grandfather's right, a little way off, with a book under her arm and her hands folded. Close to the judge is a little cousin, Margaret Gigs, who was taken into the house from charity; she is leaning forward with an open book, as if to ask for some explanation, which the judge will certainly take care not to give her. She was a lovable woman, not so pretty as she was clever, who later married the family tutor, John Clements, and used to amuse herself as a child by offending Thomas More, for the pleasure of being scolded by him.

There is one figure lacking in Holbein's sketch, and that is just the figure we should most have liked to see there. Jane Colt, More's first wife, died soon after the birth of John More, whom we see here as a man, and another had come to take care of the four orphans. More himself, in his epitaph, calls her *uxorcula Mori*, and some pathetic lines of Erasmus give the same impression of her, a frail, delicate, and gracious woman, ever ready to yield to the amiable caprices of her husband. The daughter of a country gentleman, she lived far from

London, with her two sisters, in tranquil ignorance. Flattered by the hope of having the young barrister for son-in-law, Mr Colt used often to invite him to his house. "More's mind," writes Roper, "most served him to the second daughter, for that he thought her the fairest and best favoured, yet when he considered that it would be both great grief and some shame also to the eldest to see her younger sister preferred before her in marriage, he then, of a certain pity, framed his fancy toward her, and soon after married her."

Five happy years followed. When the children were asleep, the *uxorcula Mori*, little more than a child herself, went back to her lessons, since her husband wished her to be a scholar; or else she sang and played the clavichord, for she had soon become a good musician, her husband loving nothing so well. That is all we know of her; but, little though it is, it is enough to win our love.

And now, in a corner of the picture, we find the solid, reposeful figure of Alice Middleton, More's second wife. Before we lend an ear to the unkind conjectures of the biographers who have been too eager to celebrate the conjugal martyrdom of their hero, let us see what Holbein thinks of her. He has drawn her, certainly without enthusiasm, but with the sympathy which is one of the conditions of truth in art.

The virtuous lady is on her knees before a *prie-dieu*, but the artist intended to alter his first idea. On the margin Holbein has written: "She must be sitting," and that, indeed, is the proper position for her. She was older than More, and, without being

exactly pretty, had nothing unpleasant in her appearance. Her face lacks neither intelligence nor wit, but its dominating note is tranquillity, the tranquillity that comes of somewhat commonplace good sense, of kindness and patient goodness. Erasmus, meaning to praise his friend, has left a fine eulogy of his friend's wife. "A few months after his wife's death, he married a widow, who might take care of his children (the eldest, Margaret, was barely five); she was neither young nor fair, as he would say laughingly, but an active and vigilant housewife, with whom he lived as pleasantly and sweetly as if she had all the charms of youth. You will scarcely find a husband who, by authority or severity, has gained such ready compliance as More by playful flattery. What, indeed, would he not obtain, when he has prevailed on a woman already getting old, by no means of a pliable disposition, and intent on domestic affairs, to learn to play the harp, the lute, the monochord, and the flute, and, by the appointment of her husband, to devote to this task a fixed time every day?"[1] After such evidence as that, it would need the most convincing proofs to persuade us that Alice Middleton was a constant trial to her husband's patience. I am well aware that in another passage Erasmus says he is thinking of leaving London for fear of becoming an expense to the good lady; but Erasmus, who was naturally restless, would never have stayed with his friend so long if the hospitality had been anything but cordial. It is quite possible that, after giving him a proper welcome, Lady More,

[1] B. i. 113.

in a moment of temper, may have shown some impatience with this guest, who knew not a word of English, and was bent on talking Latin. As Father Bridgett very truly says: "It would surely be a trial to the meekest or most genial of wives to hear all the conversation and the laughter-moving jokes carried on daily, for weeks together, in a language of which she could not understand a word."[1] All contemporary evidence, moreover, shows that the house was always open to a large number of friends; and though Lady More probably attached no importance to all the philosophical dialogues that went on, we may believe that she had a kind welcome for these fine talkers, as a good mother welcomes her children's playmates.

Father Bridgett, who is warm in her defence, admits that "perhaps she was somewhat worldly," saving a candle's end, as More used to say, and spoiling a velvet gown; but we know also that More, who was very negligent in matters of this world, had chosen her for her economical qualities, and surely to none but a Christian and a generous-hearted woman could her husband have written in such terms as these:—

"Mistress Alice, in my most hearty wise I recommend me to you. And whereas I am informed by my son Heron (the husband of Cecily) of the loss of our barns and our neighbours' also, with all the corn that was therein, albeit (saving God's pleasure) it is great pity of so much good corn lost, yet since it hath liked Him to send us such a chance, we must,

[1] B. i. 117.

and are bounden, not only to be content, but also to be glad of His visitation. He sent us all that we have lost, and since He hath by such a chance taken it away again, His pleasure be fulfilled. Let us never grudge thereat, but take it in good worth, and heartily thank Him, as well for adversity as for prosperity. . . . For His wisdom better seeth what is good for us than we do ourselves. Therefore I pray you be of good cheer, and take all the household with you to church, and there thank God, both for that He has given us and for that He hath taken from us, and for that He hath left it. . . . I pray you to make some good ensearch what my poor neighbours have lost, and bid them take no thought therefor; for and I should not leave myself a spoon, there shall no poor neighbour of mine bear no loss by any chance happened in my house."[1]

"Again," continues Father Bridgett, "if the widow of Mr Middleton had occasionally a sharp tongue, she was no termagant." In a letter to Erasmus of December 15, 1517, More writes: "My wife desires a million of compliments, especially for your careful wish that she may live many years. She says she is the more anxious for this as she will live the longer to plague me." This kind of playful banter does not belong to a Xantippe. Harpsfield writes as follows: "This wife on a time after shrift bade Sir Thomas More be merry, 'for I have,' saith she, 'this day left all my shrewdness, and to-morrow I will begin afresh' with merry-conceited talk, though now and then it proved very true. Indeed, Sir

[1] *English Works*, p. 1419.

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Thomas More could well digest and like it in her and others; neither was he in her debt for repaying home again oftentimes such kind of talk. Among other things, when he divers times beheld his wife what pains she took in straight binding up her hair to make her a fair large forehead, and with strait bracing in her body to make her middle small, both twain to her great pain, for the pride of a little foolish praise, he said to her: 'Forsooth, madam, if God give you not hell He shall do you great wrong, for it must needs be your own of very right, for you buy it very dear, and take very great pains therefor.' This wife, when she saw that Sir Thomas had no great list greatly to get upward in the world" (Father Bridgett is still quoting the totally unsympathetic Harpsfield), "neither would labour for office of authority, and, besides, that he forsook a right worshipful room when it was offered him, she fell in hand with him and asked: 'What will you do that ye list not to put forth yourself as other folks do? Will you sit still by the fire, and make goslings in the ashes with a stick, as children do? Would God I were a man, and look what I would do.' 'Why, wife,' quoth her husband, 'what would you do?' 'What? by God, go forward with the best. For, as my mother was wont to say (God have mercy on her soul!), it is ever better to rule than to be ruled. And, therefore, by God, I would not, I warrant you, be so foolish to be ruled when I might rule.' 'By my troth, wife,' quoth her husband, 'in this I daresay you say truth, for I never found you willing to be ruled as yet.'" [1]

[1] B. i. 117-120.

Alice might have replied by reminding him of all the music-lessons she had taken with such good grace; but there is no replying to a *bon mot*, and anyone who would take this innocent jest seriously is past convincing.

"We have now seen," concludes Father Bridgett, "all the evil that can be alleged against this lady, and it certainly does not justify our classing Blessed More amongst the ill-matched great men. To say that when his time of suffering came she did not rise to the height of his soul is merely to class her with nearly all her contemporaries, including almost every abbess, abbot, and bishop in the country." [1]

The family of More is not complete in Holbein's picture, and I cannot understand why William Roper, the husband of Margaret, is absent. For a time the good fellow was the cause of some anxiety to his father-in-law. Luther's writings had turned his head. He would not hear of prayers and sacraments, and set laboriously to work to make the famous act of faith which was to render everything else unnecessary. Only consideration for More prevented Roper, who was burning to spread the new gospel, from falling out with the secular arm. More's sadness and anxiety can easily be imagined. Fortunately the alarm was soon over, and the little bout of heretical fever passed as quickly as it had come.

We must not forget Henry Patenson, More's fool, whom Holbein has been careful to show, a little in the rear of the family group. In the Isle of Utopia, "they have singular delight and pleasure in

[1] B. i. 120, 121.

fools. And as it is a great reproach to do any of them hurt or injury, so they prohibit not to take pleasure of foolishness. For that, they think, doth much good to the fools. But if any man be so sad and stern that he cannot laugh, neither at their words nor at their deeds, none of them be committed to his tuition."[1] Patenson had nothing of that kind to fear under the roof of Thomas More, for in all a fool's memory never had so good a master been seen nor one more swift to recognise that there is no wisdom so foolish as that which remains deaf to the counsels of folly.

Right at the bottom of the picture is a small monkey, barely sketched in, beginning to climb up Lady More's dress. He is far from being out of place, for he is a reminder of one of his master's most characteristic habits: "One of his great delights," says Erasmus, "is to consider the forms, the habits, and the instincts of different kinds of animals. There is hardly a species of bird that he does not keep in his house, and rare animals, such as monkeys, foxes, ferrets, weasels, and the like. If he meets with anything foreign or in any way remarkable, he eagerly buys it, so that his house is full of such things, and at every turn they attract the eye of visitors, and his own pleasure is renewed whenever he sees others pleased."[2] It seems certain that in the final picture Holbein had put two dogs lying at the feet of the two most important people in the group, a large watch-dog for Sir John More,

[1] *Utopia*, Book ii. (Robinson's translation).

[2] B. i. 59, 60.

and a "Boulogne spaniel" for Thomas More. Their absence from the sketch is to be regretted. For the rest, it matters little that the artist, to save time, omitted to draw the musical instruments which he intended to hang in the corner on the left near the elegant side-board with the flowered pottery. "Here put a clavichord and other instruments on a shelf." The marginal note is sufficient, and like the rest of the wonderful drawing leaves an impression of suavity, of measure, and of harmony.

## II

Of the ten people in this picture, six at least are reading or just going to read. There are four books open, two about to be opened, and others scattered on the floor, to be taken up, no doubt, by Thomas More, as soon as the sitting is over. The detail is significant, a reminder that the Chancellor's four children did not regard their studies as finished. The elder ones were married, and Margaret already a mother; but the professors of Greek, Latin, astronomy, and other sciences continued their lessons, under the masterly direction of the friend of Erasmus. Never were humane letters cultivated with more eagerness, or honoured with more respect and gratitude.. "You complain occasionally in your letters to me," writes Erasmus to Budaeus, "that philology has got a bad name through you, since it has both injured your health and made you poorer. But More manages to be well spoken of

by all and in all respects; and he avers that he is indebted to literature both for better health, for the favour and affection he meets with from his excellent prince, as well as from his own countrymen and foreigners, for an increase of wealth, for becoming more agreeable both to himself and his friends, more useful to his country and his relatives, . . . and lastly, more dear to heaven. Formerly learning had a bad name, since it seemed to deprive its votaries of common-sense. Well, no journey, no business, however prolonged or arduous, makes More lay aside his books; yet you will find no one who is so companionable a man at all times and to every class, so ready to render service, so affable, so lively in conversation, or who knows so well how to unite solid prudence with sweetness of manners." [1]

In the same letter Erasmus gives some pleasant particulars of the literary education of the children. "A year ago it occurred to More to send me a specimen of their progress in study. He bade them all write to me, each one without any help, neither the subject being suggested nor the language corrected; for when they offered their papers to their father for correction, he affected to be displeased with the bad writing, and made them copy out their letters more neatly and accurately. When they had done so, he closed the letters and sent them to me without changing a syllable. Believe me, dear Budaeus, I never was more surprised; there was nothing whatever either silly or girlish in what was said, and the style was such that you would feel they

[1] B. i. 115, 116.

were making daily progress. . . . In that house you will find no one idle, no one busied in feminine trifles. Titus Livius is ever in their hands. They have advanced so far that they can read such authors and understand them without a translation, unless there occurs some such word as would perhaps perplex myself. His wife, who excels in good sense and experience rather than in learning, governs the little company with wonderful tact, assigning to each a task, and requiring its performance, allowing no one to be idle or to be occupied in trifles."[1] Latin or no Latin—the least suspicion of pedantry would here be utterly ridiculous. Moreover, More has left us his system of education in a letter written from Court to one of the tutors of his family. The letter is in Latin, and the principal passages of it were no doubt given the children to learn by heart. It is too precious not to be quoted here.

"I have received, my dear Gunnell, your letter, elegant as your letters always are, and full of affection. From your letter I perceive your devotion to my children; I argue their diligence from their own. Every one of these letters pleased me, but I was particularly pleased because I notice that Elizabeth shows a gentleness and self-command in the absence of her mother which some children would not show in her presence. Let her understand that such conduct delights me more than all possible letters I could receive from any one. Though I prefer learning joined with virtue to all the treasures of kings, yet renown for learning,

[1] B. i. 115.

when it is not united with a good life, is nothing else than splendid and notorious infamy. . . . On the other hand, if a woman (and this I desire and hope with you as their teacher for all my daughters) to eminent virtue should add an outwork of even moderate skill in literature, I think she will have more real profit than if she had obtained the riches of Crœsus and the beauty of Helen. I do not say this because of the glory which will be hers, . . . but because the reward of wisdom is too solid to be lost like riches or to decay like beauty. . . . Among all the benefits that learning bestows on men, there is none more excellent than this, that by the study of books we are taught in that very study not to seek praise, but utility. Such has been the teaching of the most learned men, especially of philosophers, who are the guides of human life. . . . I have dwelt so much on this matter, my dear Gunnell, because of what you say in your letter, that Margaret's lofty character should not be abased. In this judgment I quite agree with you; but to me, and, no doubt, to you also, that man would seem to abase a generous character who should accustom it to admire what is vain and low. . . . Therefore, my dear Gunnell, since we must walk by this road, I have often begged not you only, who, out of your affection for my children, would do it of your own accord, . . . but all my friends to warn my children to avoid the precipice of pride and haughtiness, and to walk in the pleasant meadows of modesty; not to be dazzled at the sight of gold; not to lament that they do not possess what they erroneously admire in others; not to

think more of themselves for gaudy trappings, nor less for the want of them; neither to deform the beauty that nature has given them by neglect, nor to try to heighten it by artifice; to put virtue in the first place, learning in the second; and in their studies to esteem most whatever may teach them piety towards God, charity to all, and modesty and Christian humility in themselves. By such means they will receive from God the reward of an innocent life, and in the assured expectation of it, will view death without horror, and meanwhile possessing solid joy, will neither be puffed up by the empty praise of men, nor dejected by evil tongues. These I consider the genuine fruits of learning, and, though I admit that all literary men do not possess them, I would maintain that those who give themselves to study with such views will easily attain their end and become perfect. . . .

"If it be true that the evil of a woman's brain be bad, and apter to bear bracken than corn, by which saying many keep women from study, I think, on the contrary, that a woman's wit is on that account all the more diligently to be cultivated, that nature's defect may be redressed by industry. This was the opinion of the ancients, of those who were most prudent as well as most holy. Not to speak of the rest, St Jerome and St Augustine not only exhorted excellent matrons and most noble virgins to study, but also, in order to assist them, diligently explained the abstruse meanings of Holy Scripture, and wrote for tender girls letters replete with so sound erudition, that nowadays old men, who call themselves pro-

fessors of sacred science, can scarcely read them correctly, much less understand them. Do you, my learned Gunnell, have the kindness to see that my daughters thoroughly learn these works of those holy men; and from hence they will learn what end they ought to propose from their learning, and how wholly they ought to look for its fruits in a good conscience, and the approval of heaven. Thus, internally happy and tranquil, they will neither be moved by the praise of flatterers, nor chagrined by the ignorant scoffers at learning.

"I fancy I hear you object that these precepts, though true, are beyond the capacity of my young children. . . . But, dear Gunnell, the more I see the difficulty of getting rid of this pest of pride, the more do I see the necessity of setting to work at it from childhood. For I find no other reason why this evil clings so to our hearts, than because almost as soon as we are born it is sown in the tender minds of children by their nurses, it is cultivated by their teachers, and brought to its full growth by their parents. . . . Thus we grow accustomed to make so much of praise, that while we study how to please the greater number (who will always be the worst), we grow ashamed of being good (with the few). That this plague of vain-glory may be banished far from my children I do desire that you, my dear Gunnell, and their mother and all their friends, would sing this song to them, and repeat it, and beat it into their heads, that vain-glory is a thing despicable and to be spit upon; and that there is nothing more sublime than that humble

modesty so often praised by Christ. . . . To this purpose nothing will more conduce than to read them the lessons of the ancient Fathers, who, as they know, cannot be angry with them. . . . If you will teach something of this sort, in addition to their lesson in Sallust—to Margaret and Elizabeth, as being more advanced than John and Cecily—you will bind me and them still more to you. And thus you will bring about that my children, who are dear to me by nature, and still more dear by learning and virtue, will become most dear by that advance in knowledge and good conduct. Adieu. From the Court on the vigil of Pentecost." [1]

In matters of education, as of public business, More knew the value of a well-placed compliment. His letters to his children are full of encouragement and praise. There is no call, I think, here, to defend him against the partisans of an inhuman pedagogy, and I will only mention that his gently satiric spirit cut short, when need arose, all temptations to childish vanity.

"I think," he wrote to them on one occasion, "that you have no longer any need of Mr Nicholas, since you have learnt whatever he had to teach you about astronomy. I hear you are so far advanced in that science that you can not only point out the polar-star or the dog-star, or any of the constellations, but are able also—which requires a skilful and profound astrologer—among all these leading heavenly bodies, to distinguish the sun from the moon! Go forward, then, in that new and admirable science

[1] B. i. 127-31.

by which you ascend to the stars. But while you gaze on them assiduously, consider that this holy time of Lent warns you, and that beautiful and holy poem of Boetius keeps singing in your ears, to raise your mind also to heaven."[1]

The girls of those days were no more remarkable than those of our own for a keen delight in family correspondence; in the case of More's daughters it was all the more excusable because they were obliged to write in Latin. They used to plead want of time, or the hurried departure of the courier, or the lack of interesting news.

"How can a subject be wanting when you write to me," asks their father, "since I am glad to hear of your studies or of your games? and you will please me most if, when there is nothing to write about, you write me that nothing at great length. Nothing can be easier for you, since you are girls, loquacious by nature, who have always a world to say about nothing at all. One thing, however, I admonish you, whether you write serious matters or the merest trifles: it is my wish that you write everything diligently and thoughtfully. It will be no harm if you first write the whole in English, for then you will have much less trouble in turning it into Latin; not having to look for the matter, your mind will be intent only on the language. That, however, I leave to your own choice, whereas I strictly enjoin that whatever you have composed you carefully examine before writing it out clean; and in this examination, first scrutinise the whole sentence and then every

[1] B. i. 132, 133.

part of it. Thus, if any solecisms have escaped you, you will easily detect them. Correct these, write the whole letter again, and even then examine it once more, for sometimes, in rewriting, faults slip in again that one had expunged. By this diligence, your little trifles will become serious matters; for while there is nothing so neat and witty that will not be made insipid by silly and inconsiderate loquacity, so also there is nothing in itself so insipid that you cannot season with grace and wit if you give a little thought to it. Farewell, my dear children. From the Court, the 3rd September." [1]

I am obliged to pass over other equally interesting letters, and prefer in their place a little note of a more intimate and less academic kind, which seems to me to be perhaps the most illuminating and most charming thing in all the abundant collection of More's writings. The reader may remember that during his career at Oxford, young More had not a groat in his purse, and could not even have his shoes mended without writing to his father. These details we have from himself, and in giving them he praises his father's prudence highly. And now we find Margaret writing to him one day to ask for a little money. The reply was not long in coming.

"You ask, my dear Margaret, for money with too much bashfulness and timidity, since you are asking from a father who is eager to give, and since you have written to me a letter such that I would not only repay each line of it with a golden philippine,

[1] B. i. 134.

as Alexander did the verses of Cherilos, but, if my means were as great as my desire, I would reward each syllable with two gold ounces. As it is, I send only what you have asked, but would have added more, only that as I am eager to give, so am I desirous to be asked and coaxed by my daughter, especially by you, whom virtue and learning have made so dear to my soul. So the sooner you spend this money well, as you are wont to do, and the sooner you ask for more, the more you will be sure of pleasing your father."[1]

Father Bridgett makes the happy observation that "whatever little romance is wanting in the courtships of this singular man is made up for by the intensity of affection poured out from the father's heart on this gracious child."[2] But beyond and above the romance, it reveals one of the essential features of his singular character. In dealing with matters of all kinds, education, controversy, or Christian philosophy, More was just the same, the man who could find unqualified praise for the severity of his father, and at the very same moment open his purse-strings and his heart to the slightest wishes of his children. He remained the same throughout, faithful to the past but paving the way for the future, ready to accept whatever was necessary and excellent in tradition, but otherwise determined to follow, without advertisement or noise, the best inspirations of the "new times." In a letter in elegiacs which he improvised during a ride in the rain, he reminds his children how he always brought

[1] B. i. 135. [2] B. i. 138.

them presents from every journey, cakes, fruit, or fine stuffs, and how for every stroke of the birch he had given them a hundred kisses, the birch itself being nothing more terrible than a bundle of peacocks' feathers.

## III

If I had time to embark on paradoxes, I might show, without undue trouble, that the love of home is rather French than English, and that England is, in a word, the classic land of friendship. And from this point of view, it would be pleasant to point to More as an example and a precursor. "*Ad amicitiam natus factusque videtur*," says Erasmus, who was an authority on the subject. But the foregoing chapter will enable us, I hope, to dispense with any further discourse on friendship and the friendship of Thomas More. We know, too, and should in any case have guessed, that his kind heart went out to all kinds of suffering.

"More was used," says Stapleton, "whenever in his house or in the village he lived in there was a woman in labour, to begin praying, and so continue until news was brought him that the delivery had come happily to pass.

"The charity of More was without bounds, as is proved by the frequent and abundant alms he poured without distinction among all unfortunate persons. He used himself to go through the back lanes and inquire into the state of poor families; and he would

relieve their distress, not by scattering a few small coins, as is the general custom, but when he ascertained a real need, by two, three, or four gold pieces.

"When his official position and duties prevented this personal attention, he would send some of his family to dispense his alms, especially to the sick and the aged. The office often fell to Margaret Gigs, the wife of John Clements. . . .

"He very often invited to his table his poorer neighbours, receiving them . . . familiarly and joyously; he rarely invited the rich, and scarcely ever the nobility. Not a week passed without his taking some poor sufferer into his house and having him tended. In his parish of Chelsea he hired a house, in which he gathered many infirm, poor, and old people, and maintained them at his own expense. When More was away his eldest daughter, Margaret, . . . had the care of this house.

"He even received into his household and supported a poor widow named Paula, who had spent all her money on a lawsuit. . . .

"But lest he should feel any hatred for any of his neighbours, and in order to love each and all with pure charity, according to that most sure mark of a Christian, of which Christ said: "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another" (John xiii.), he drew up for himself a certain rule of life . . . which, for the benefit of mankind, I will here transcribe from his English works. He, indeed, wrote it with a coal in his prison; but I would have it written in letters of gold: 'Bear no malice nor

evil will to no man living. For either the man is good or naughty. If he be good and I hate him, then am I naughty. If he be naughty, either he shall amend and die good, and go to God, or abide naughty and die naughty and go to the Devil. And then let me remember that if he shall be saved, he shall not fail (if I be saved too, as I trust to be) to love me very heartily, and I shall then in likewise love him. And why should I now then hate one for this while, which shall hereafter love me for evermore: and why should I now be an enemy to him with whom I shall in time coming be coupled in eternal friendship? And, on the other side, if he shall continue naughty and be damned, there is then so outrageous eternal sorrow towards him that I may well think myself a deadly cruel wretch if I would not now rather pity his pain than malign his person. If one would say that we may well with good conscience wish an evil man harm, lest he should do harm to such other folk as are innocent and good, I will not now dispute upon that point. . . . But verily thus will I say, that I will give counsel to every good friend of mine, but if he be put in such a room as to punish an evil man [that] lieth in his charge by reason of his office, else leave the desire of punishing unto God. . . . But let us, that are no better than men of a mean sort, ever pray for such merciful amendment in other folk as our own conscience showeth us that we have need in our self.'[1] Such was the charity of More towards God and his neighbour."[2]

[1] *English Works*, p. 1405. [2] Stapleton, cap. vi.

But it is time to complete this chapter by speaking of his religion, the loving and serious religion which with him was the rule and standard of all things, the dominating factor of his life.

"The higher he rose in honours," says Nisard, "the closer did his mind return to the austere religion of his youth."[1] There is nothing to give this imaginative statement the slightest appearance of foundation, but the mistake is quite possible at first sight, because his religious life was essentially personal, meditative, and silent. Next to his library he had a chapel, and we get an adequate idea of his piety from the statement that he devoted more time to God than even to his books. But for all the inwardness of his Christianity he was as attached in heart and mind to the slightest practices of the Church as the simplest of the faithful. After reminding us that More heard Mass every day, Stapleton goes on: "He recited daily the morning and evening prayers, joining thereto the seven penitential psalms and Litanies. He frequently added the graduals and the psalm *Beati immaculati*. He had also certain private prayers, which are contained in his collected English works, some in Latin, some in English. Copying St Jerome and others, he made himself a little psalter or compendium of psalms by selection from the rest, . . . and this he used often. From this fervent care for prayer he had not only built himself a retired little building in a remote part of his house, where he might be undisturbed in study, prayer, and meditation, . . . but also in his

[1] p. 203.

parish church at Chelsea he built a little chapel, and furnished it copiously with all things necessary for the worship of God, and others appertaining to the adornment and decoration of God's house. . . . He presented many gold and silver vessels to his church, . . . but in that same church, clothed in a surplice, he took his part in the singing of the services. He did this even when Chancellor of the kingdom; and on being warned by the Duke of Norfolk, who had found him thus wearing a surplice and singing in the choir, that the King would certainly be displeased at a proceeding so humble and so little suited to one of his station, he replied: 'My master the King cannot be displeased at the service I pay to his Master God.' Sometimes he served the priest's Mass; and sometimes in the public supplications he carried the cross before the priest, not refusing or blushing to perform the office of a verger. This he did often, until he became Chancellor of the realm. But even then he followed in the many processions in Rogation week, in which the way was often long; and on being asked by his friends to ride on account of his dignity, he refused, saying: 'My Lord went on foot, I will not follow Him on horseback,' by which he alluded to the image of the crucifix, in which he venerated the Lord. Whenever he was appointed to some new office or was about to undertake some arduous piece of work, he would always draw strength from the Holy Communion. Sometimes he would go on pilgrimage to holy places some seven miles from his home, and that always on foot, which is a thing that in England the common

people scarcely do."[1] To Stapleton also we owe some interesting particulars of the religious practices which More had introduced as rules into his household. "None, not even nobles, were allowed to play cards or dice. He had such care of chastity that the men and maids slept in different buildings, . . . and the women were forbidden to go into that part of the house where the men worked except in case of necessity. . . . When he was at Chelsea, he used to summon the greater part of the household into the hall before they went to bed, and there pray with them in common, and recite three psalms (all kneeling), such as *Miserere mei Deus*, *Ad te Domine levavi*, or *Deus misereatur nostri*. To these he added the *Salve Regina* with the collect, and ended with the *De profundis* for the dead. This he continued to do when he was Chancellor. He never allowed any to be absent from Mass on holy days; and even made them rise in the night on the great festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, and be present at the whole office. When any of his household committed a fault, he reproached them, but with such gentleness that they loved him the more for it. Margaret Gigs used to relate . . . that sometimes she used to offend More on purpose in order to enjoy his most loving and suave correction. . . . At table, some of the Scriptures used to be read, with the commentary of Nicolas of Lyra or some other ancient writer. One of the little girls used to read . . . and the reading was always closed, as it is in monastic houses, with the words *Tu autem Domine miserere nostri.*

[1] Stapleton, cap. vi.; *cf.* Roper.

. . . If any man of learning were present (as often happened) they took counsel in common concerning the reading they had heard; and when that was done, More was the first to start some jest (in which he had the happiest humour), and set every one laughing heartily. For at that time Henry Patenson, More's fool, took his part. . . . Every year, on Good Friday, he called the whole of his family into the 'New Building,' and there had the Passion read to them, generally by his secretary, John Harris."[1]

There has recently been discovered a confidential letter from one of More's confessors; and this simple evidence, written in poor English, confirms the recollections preserved in Stapleton's somewhat eloquent prose. "Item, as for Sir Thomas More, he was my parishioner at London. I christened him two goodly children. I buried his first wife. . . . This Mr More was my ghostly child; in his confession to be so pure, so clean, with great study, deliberation, and devotion, I never heard many such. . . . He was devout in his divine service, and what more—keep you this privily to yourself—he wore a great hair (*sic*) next his skin, in so much that my mistress marvelled when his shirts was washed. Item, this mistress his wife desired me to counsel [him] to put [off] that hard and rough shirt of hair."[2]

Roper tells us that one evening at table, the Chancellor having taken off his gown, Anne Cresacre, John More's young wife, caught sight of the top of his

[1] Stapleton, cap. ix.

[2] *English Historical Review*, vii. pp. 712-15 (the spelling modernised).

hair shirt and began to laugh at it. Margaret, perceiving this, told him of it in private; he was sorry, for he wished his eldest daughter to be the only one aware of his mortifications. Margaret, in fact, was charged to take care of her father's instruments of penance, and we shall see that the hair-shirt, thenceforth useless, was secretly sent her by More on the eve of his martyrdom.

## CHAPTER IV

### PUBLIC LIFE

If I should propose to any king wholesome decrees, doing my endeavour to pluck out of his mind the pernicious original causes of vice and naughtiness, think you not that I should forthwith either be driven away, or else made a laughing-stock? (*Utopia*, Book i.).

A FEW pages will suffice for this chapter; and yet it might have been important in the history of modern times, as a little reflection will show. On the threshold of the sixteenth century, King Utopus left his fine town of Amaurote, and consented to mould with his own hands, in the quality of chief minister, the ideas, the manners, and the general policy of England. He fashioned the new world with intelligence and respect for religious liberty, nipped the greed of imperialism in the bud, bridled the tyranny of legal injustice, and finally, and above all, having foreseen, long before the terrible evidence of the hours of crisis, the gravity of the social problem, he accustomed the public mind to look for and prepare a solution by other means than the unfailing impotence of the laws.[1] It is all a dream of dreams, and yet the England of the Tudors was not far from witnessing a like marvel. Put a Louis XIII. in place of Henry VIII., or, simpler still, suppress Wolsey and let More succeed Warham, and some part at

[1] The above is a bird's-eye view of the scheme of *Utopia*.

least of the programme might perhaps actually have begun to be realised.

There is no excuse for saying "Too good to be true!" or "All very well on an undiscoverable island!" One must have read *Utopia* very unintelligently to call More's mind chimerical. On the contrary, no one knew more clearly than he where possible reforms ended and Utopian ideas began. By a rare combination, the philosopher was also a man of affairs, a politician, and the politician a philosopher. Stranger still, though he was both a philosopher and an honourable man, he attained to the highest office in his country and held it for fifteen years. But here we find fortune strangely inadvertent. His office gave More but the shadow of power. The friend and confidant of an absolute king—and such a king as Henry—he was soon to limit his whole ambition to the policy of the least evil, and expend the best of his genius on the task of delaying the hour at which the passionate monarch would cease to listen to any but those who agreed with him.

And so More's life never becomes absorbed in general history, like the lives of lesser men, who, being free to act as they choose, have left their impress on the internal and external policy of a nation. The author of *Utopia* took the initiative in no reform, no law bears his name; and but for the humanist and the martyr, the history of his time might be written without mention of him. The result is that he becomes, in a more intimate way, the property of his biographers, who are at liberty almost entirely to

neglect the minister in him and see nothing but the man. Forgetting the distractions of the Court and the trappings of the Chancellor's robe, they need only try to penetrate deeper into the secret of that sweet and grave expression, now perhaps a little graver than before,

## II

When the royal favour came to seek him out, More was one of the most prominent of his countrymen. He was under-sheriff in 1510, and having quickly won popularity with the common people by his expeditious and conciliatory way of administering justice, he became thenceforward, it appears, the leading barrister in London. According to Roper, his annual income exceeded £400 a year. Henry VIII. knew the value of the man who was praised to the skies by the hellenists, and no less esteemed in the world of business and the courts of justice. He wished to entice him to Court and attach him to his person. More quite understood that he would not be able to escape for ever, but he was in no hurry to abdicate his independence. More than once he declined to reply to the advances made him by Wolsey on behalf of the King, and he would have resisted longer still but for a concourse of circumstances which forced him into the mill against his own desire. In 1515, the city asked the king's permission to make the young magistrate a member of an embassy they were sending to Flanders to settle certain commercial differences. The embassy

lasted six months. More took advantage of his enforced holiday to form a friendship with a number of continental scholars and to begin *Utopia*. In 1517, during the riots of May, he harangued the rebels in the street at the invitation of the Privy Council. Soon afterwards he was sent on a new mission. From Calais, which he found very dull, he wrote to Erasmus:—

"I quite approve of your resolution not to meddle with the laborious triflings of princes; and you show your love for me in wishing that I may extricate myself from them. You can scarcely believe how unwillingly I am engaged in them. Nothing can be more odious than this legation. I am relegated to this little maritime town, of which both the surroundings and the climate are unpleasant; and if litigation, even at home, where it brings gain, is so abhorrent to my nature, how tedious must it be here, where it only brings loss!"[1]

Willy-nilly, he was thenceforth unable to defend himself any longer. His visits to Court became more frequent. The King could not do without him. In 1508 he became a member of the Privy Council; in 1521 he was knighted, and never left his master again except upon numerous embassies. Finally, on October 25, 1529, he was appointed Lord Chancellor in place of Wolsey disgraced. London applauded, Erasmus grumbled, though not ill-pleased at heart to see a man of intellect at the head of affairs. But what was More's own opinion of it all?

He has stated it frankly in *Utopia*, and that book,

[1] B. i. 76.

which was published in 1516, is certainly not the work of a restlessly ambitious man. The king, who had certainly read it, had found in it strange things and a barely disguised condemnation of his policy of conquest. When urged to give the republic the benefit of the experience of his numerous journeys, Raphael Hythloday shrugged his shoulders, saying that wisdom and justice were exiled for ever from the councils of kings. More himself, a less intractable person, developed without undue enthusiasm the reasons which might permit a man of honour to embark on such offices.

"That is it which I meant (quoth he) when I said philosophy had no place among kings.—Indeed (quoth I) this school philosophy hath not: which thinketh all things meet for every place. But there is another philosophy more civil, which knoweth, as ye would say, her own stage, and thereafter ordering and behaving herself in the play that she hath in hand, playeth her part accordingly with comeliness, uttering nothing out of due order and fashion. And this is the philosophy that you must use. Or else while a comedy of Plautus is playing . . . if you should suddenly come upon the stage in a Philosopher's apparel and rehearse out of Octavia the place wherein Seneca disputeth with Nero: had it not been better for you to have played the dumb person, than by rehearsing that which served neither for the time nor place to have made such a tragical comedy or gallimaufry? . . . What part soever you have taken upon you, play that as well as you can and make the best of it: and do not therefore

disturb and bring out of order the whole matter, because that another which is merrier and better cometh to your remembrance. So the case standeth in a commonwealth, and so it is in the consultation of kings and princes. If evil opinions and naughty persuasions cannot be utterly and quite plucked out of their hearts, if you cannot even as you would remedy vices which use and custom have confirmed: yet for this cause you must not leave and forsake the commonwealth; you must not forsake the ship in a tempest, because you cannot rule and keep down the winds. No, nor you must not labour to drive into their heads new and strange informations, which you know well shall be nothing regarded with them that be of clean contrary minds. But you must with a crafty wile and a subtle train steady and endeavour yourself, as much as in you lieth, to handle the matter wittily and handsomely for the purpose, and that which you cannot turn to good, so to order it that it be not very bad. For it is not possible for all things to be well, unless all men were good, which I think will not be this good many years."[1]

There speaks More, or rather, there speaks common-sense. None the less, Raphael has the last word. He rises with that easy eloquence of his, so dear to absolute minds, against the policy of "cast about" and the least evil. Compromise, compliance, these are the surest means of letting evil men go undisturbed. In every way the wise man cuts but a sad figure at Court.

"For either I must say otherwise than they say,

[1] *Utopia*, book i.

and then I were as good to say nothing, or else I must say the same that they say, and . . . help to further their madness."[1]

The Chancellor of to-morrow makes no reply to the dilemma, does not even trouble to remind us that this impeccable logician of the policy of abstention was newly arrived from Utopia.

## III

Some have thought to render the memory of More a service by declaring that he took his place at Court and kept it so long only with the most utter repugnance. The human truth is not so simple but more interesting, and in my opinion quite as edifying. When we remember that in the happy land of the Utopians insignia of precious metals are reserved for criminals as a mark of infamy, it is easy to guess that More found no pleasure in hanging round his neck the heavy gold chain of the Chancellor. He had a very keen and English taste for independence, and the necessity of being constantly at the king's orders must have weighed on him heavier still. He had a horror of dice and cards, which were the commonest distraction or occupation of the Court. An enemy to every idea and desire of luxury, he must have composed or recalled a score of epigrams against the idle, brilliant crowd of courtiers. Anne Boleyn soon came to display the cultivated graces she had learned in France, and More was not the

[1] *Utopia*, book i.

man to be gentle with the vain folk who bartered the healthy rudenesses of their own country for foreign elegance.

> "Quisquis insula satus Britannica
> Sic patriam insolens fastidiet suam
> Ut more simiae laboret fingere
> Et aemulari gallicas ineptias."[1]

The atmosphere of futility, the lies that were soon to become tragic, the universal complaisance that was soon to reveal its shallow worthlessness, everything, in fact, tended to aggravate a servitude which kept him far from his family, his dear house at Chelsea, and his books.

But he is not to be regarded as a sort of Alceste,[2] the constant censor of a life in which nearly everything was foreign to him. His independence was not angular. His early biographers relate with a world of detail a scene in Parliament in which More is said to have put a check on the pride of the Cardinal and the commands of the king. It is difficult to unravel what is true in the story from what is obviously legendary. Another anecdote is of less doubtful authenticity. At a discussion in the Privy Council More flatly opposed a measure introduced by the Cardinal. "You show yourself a foolish councillor, Master More," said the Cardinal. "I thank God," replied More, "that his royal Highness has but one fool in his Council!" That is very like him, especially if the gesture and the smile which carried off the speech are not forgotten. In vain he disliked the Court; he had the stuff of

[1] *Opera latina*, p. 24.

[2] *Le Misanthrope* of Molière.

a courtier in him. Why not? Suppleness, self-forgetfulness, a sense for necessary conciliation and management of others, a knowledge of the weak side on which the most violent are accessible, a desire to please, in fact the whole of that worldly art, seasoned with plenty of wit, is neither so insipid nor so contemptible when its use is not directed to petty vanity or personal advancement. Thomas More had no lack of wit, and of his pride as a Christian and a man of honour he was ready, when need arose, to give ample proof. Meanwhile, he is not prodigal of disagreement. So long as there is no question of a plain duty he lends himself adroitly and gracefully to the common need, and caresses the little foibles of the great folk around him with a pleasant mixture of amused respect and kindly irony.

"When I was first in Almaine, Uncle" (Almaine was not a hundred miles from London) "it happed to me to be somewhat favoured with a great man of the Church and a great state, one of the greatest in all that country there" (Wolsey is easily recognisable). . . . "But glorious was he very far above all measures, and that was great pity, for it did harm, and made him abuse many great gifts that God had given him. Never was he satiate of hearing his own praise. So happed it one day, that he had in a great audience made an oration in a certain manner, wherein he liked himself so well that at his dinner he sat, him thought, on thorns, till he might hear how they that sat with him at his board would commend it. And when he had sat musing awhile, devising, as I thought after, upon

some pretty proper way to bring it in withal, at the last, for lack of a better (lest he should have letted the matter too long), he brought it even bluntly forth, and asked us all . . . how well we liked his oration that he had made that day. But in faith, Uncle, when that problem was once proponed, till it was full answered, no man (I ween) ate one morsel of meat more. Every man was fallen in so deep a study for the finding of some exquisite praise." The story takes its course, for More is never in a hurry when writing. When it is finished, a new adventure, another personal reminiscence, no doubt, comes to show that it is not well to tell the truth to princes, even when they ask for it. Finally, the conversation ends with this agreeable moral, which More's supple and generous nature had no difficulty in putting into practice.

"I can well allow that men should commend (keeping them within the bounds of truth) such things as they see praiseworthy in other men, to give them the greater courage to the increase thereof. For men keep still in that point one condition of children, that praise must prick them forth. But better it were to do well and look for none. Howbeit they that cannot find in their heart to commend another man's good deed, show themselves either envious, or else of nature very cold and dull."[1]

For instances of this cordial flattery we need only turn to More's letters to the Chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey. The Cardinal, who remained in London during the king's numerous journeys, regularly kept

[1] *A Dialogue of Comfort*, iii., chap. x., *Of Flattery*.

his master informed of the progress of affairs. More usually accompanied Henry VIII. and replied for him to Wolsey, but not without finding means of breaking with the dull impersonality of the protocol.

"The letter your Grace devised . . . his Grace so well liked, that I never saw him like thing better; and, as help me God in my poor fantasy, not causeless, for it is for the quantity one of the best-made letters for words, matter, sentence, and couching that ever I read in my life."

"In the reding and advising of all which things, his Highness said that he perceived well what labour, study, pain, and travail your Grace had taken in the device and penning of so many, so great things, so high well despatched in so brief time, when the only reading thereof held him above two hours."[1] He takes a pleasure in dispensing to his correspondent the "food for self-congratulation" of which Nicole was to speak later. He is evidently delighted to communicate the royal commendations, and prove to the Cardinal that the king has affectionate thoughts of him. Henry VIII. having sent the minister the game killed in a hunt, More replies to the letter of thanks that the king wished it had been much better.[2]

"The King," he wrote again, "was very joyful that . . . your Grace is so well in health as he heareth by divers; and he saith that ye may thank his counsel thereof by which ye leave the often taking of medicines that ye were wont to use."[3]

[1] Ellis, i. pp. 203, 204, 206.
[2] *Letters and Papers*, iii. 3298.
[3] Ellis, i. pp. 197, 198.

This simplicity, no doubt, is characteristic of the times, but More's merit consists in thus collecting for the Cardinal's benefit the smallest scraps of the king's attentions, and that at a time when no one was deeper in Henry VIII.'s confidence than himself.

## IV

That brings us to one of the most curious features of his character as courtier. It has been said of More, and not without justice, that his daughter Margaret was the single passion of his life. But I question whether another person, king Henry himself, had not also a special place in his faithful heart, and if More's consent, after his first interviews with the king, to devote himself entirely to his service, was not given to a certain extent in obedience to the call of a respectful affection. There is nothing surprising in the supposition, when we recall the absolute fascination that the king was long able to throw over the most eminent men about him.

"To no sovereign," says Brewer, "did ministers ever dedicate themselves, head and heart, body and soul, with more intense devotion. . . . His praise was coveted as famishing men crave for bread. . . . Had Henry been the wilful, capricious, and self-indulgent monarch he is sometimes represented, the intense personal devotion of such men as Wolsey, Cromwell, More, Gardiner, Fitzwilliam . . . would have been the most unintelligible paradox in history."[1]

[1] *Letters and Papers*, iii. pp. ccxci., ccxcii.

"He is so affable and courteous to all men," said More, "that each one thinks himself his favourite, even as the citizens' wives imagine that Our Lady's picture at the Tower smiles upon them as they pray before it."[1] The remark shows a wary mind, that was not so swiftly to be drawn into excess of confidence. To tell the truth, it seems that More was not long under any illusion on the durability of the King's favour. We shall find him presently expressing himself pretty freely to his son-in-law, Roper, but to the end he remained under the spell.

Writing to Fisher, he said: "I have come to Court entirely against my will, and as the King himself often jestingly reproaches me for. And I am as uncomfortable as a carpet knight in the saddle. . . . Yet such is the virtue and learning of the King, and his daily increasing progress in both, that the more I see him increase in these kingly ornaments, the less troublesome the courtiers' life becomes to me."[2]

Roper's is the classical and permanent account of the long friendship between Henry VIII. and Thomas More. The King used "upon holy days, when he had done his own devotions, to send for him into his traverse, and there—sometimes in matters of astronomy, geometry, divinity, and such other faculties, and sometimes of his worldly affairs—to sit and confer with him. And other whiles, in the night, would he have him up into the leads, there to consider with him the diversities, courses, motions, and operations of the stars and planets.

[1] B. i. 168. [2] Stapleton, cap. vii.; Hutton, p. 149.

And because he was of a pleasant disposition, it pleased the King and Queen, after the council had supped, at the time of their supper, for their pleasure commonly to call for him to be merry with them. When he perceived them so much in his talk to delight, that he could not once in a month get leave to go home to his wife and children (whose company he most desired), and to be absent from the Court two days together but that he should be thither sent for again: he, much misliking this restraint of his liberty, began thereupon somewhat to dissemble his nature, and . . . by little and little, from his former mirth to disuse himself. . . .

"And for the pleasure he took in his company would his Grace suddenly sometimes come home to his house at Chelsea to be merry with him, whither, on a time, unlooked for, he came to dinner, and after dinner, in a fair garden of his, walked with him."

From the windows, the whole family were following, with grateful surprise, the slightest gestures of the two who walked below.

"*Il me dit: Bonjour, ma chère,*
*Bonjour, ma chère:*
*Il vous à parlé, grand-mère,*
*Il vous à parlé.*" [1]

Be it Napoleon or Henry VIII., it is still the same instinct of loyalism which the blackest crimes of tyrants cannot stifle in the hearts of faithful subjects. All those years after, Roper had not forgotten that

[1] "He said to me: 'Good day, my dear, good day, my dear.' He spoke to you, grandmamma, he spoke to you!" (Béranger).

during the whole hour that intimate conversation lasted the king, who was taller than More, had his arm round his friend's neck. "As soon as his Grace was gone, I, rejoicing thereat, said to Sir Thomas More, how happy he was whom the King had so familiarly entertained, as I never had seen him do to any before, except Cardinal Wolsey, whom I saw his Grace walk once with arm in arm. 'I thank our Lord, son,' quoth he, 'I find his Grace my very good lord indeed, and I believe he doth as singularly favour me as any subject within this realm: howbeit, son Roper, I may tell thee, I have no cause to be proud thereof, for if my head would win him a castle in France (for then there was war between us), it should not fail to go.'"

These reminiscences of the time when More was at the height of his enjoyment of the King's friendship serve to explain how it was that the political action of the future Chancellor was always restrained and effaced. A witty talker, looked to for an hour of intellectual distraction, an honourable man, whose friendship it was a pride to possess, a man of letters and a scholar, to be consulted on the motions of the stars or the best way of replying to an objection of Luther's—More was all that to Henry VIII., but nothing more. "That More's name," says Father Bridgett, "does not appear much more prominently during these years in English history is greatly due to his want of ambition."[1] That seems to me a kind of praise ill-calculated to advance the glory of our beatified hero. He had been called, whether he

[1] B. i. 153.

would or not, to public life, and ambition, the ambition, that is, of directing the power of the sovereign towards the greatest good, would have been nothing less than a duty. But to a minister of Henry VIII. such aims were closed. More had no call to refuse an authority that was never offered him. An absolute monarch in the full meaning of the phrase, Henry would have none about him but advisers, secretaries, or flatterers. Even Wolsey's reign was far shorter than many historians imagine, and the Cardinal often took upon himself the responsibility of unpopular measures which had secretly emanated from a higher quarter. "Wolsey," says Mr Gairdner, . . . "even bore at times the unpopularity of measures which were not his own when the king required a scape-goat; and it is wonderful how in the early years of the reign people seemed to be convinced that 'the king could do no wrong.'"[1] More's early biographers, who are witnesses to contemporary opinion, attack the Cardinal to the extent of insinuating that the whole affair of the divorce was due entirely to his machinations.[2]

The publication of the State Papers proves this legend to be groundless. "Though Henry VIII.," says Mr Gairdner again, "was well aware that Wolsey was his most sagacious adviser and most practical man of business, it was he himself who in all cases decided on the line of action to be followed, while Wolsey devised means of accomplishing the

[1] *History of the English Church*, chap. ii. pp. 18, 19.

[2] In revenge, according to them, against the Emperor, who had prevented his being elected Pope.

intended objects."[1] Now, that being so, if Wolsey, who began by being absolute master, was so soon compelled to abdicate, it is easy to understand that More, who followed him, and moreover cared little for leading *rôles*, had less authority still. And here let us take the opportunity to reply, in passing, to those whose animosity against Wolsey has persuaded them at all costs to make out that he and Sir Thomas More were enemies. The truth is that, so long as Wolsey was Chancellor, and while More, under his authority, was rapidly ascending the ladder, not of power, but of honours, they walked shoulder to shoulder,[2] the Cardinal leaning with absolute confidence on a loyal *protégé*, whom he knew to be incapable of manœuvring against him, and More full of deference for a minister whose high worth he knew and whose influence retarded the complete victory of the King's boon companions.

In 1529, when the king appointed More to succeed the Cardinal, the battle was lost, and we shall see shortly the spirit in which he resigned himself to the dignity which he clearly foresaw could mean nothing to him but the beginning of the final disgrace.

## V

No chance of direct action being offered him, More remained throughout his political career

[1] *Ibid.*, cap. v. p. 66.

[2] Except, of course, on the question of the divorce, in which More, without condemning Wolsey's proceedings, refused to take any part.

simply the subordinate of Wolsey and the king. The monumental collection of public and private papers relating to this epoch leaves no doubt on that point. When he accompanies Henry VIII. to the Field of the Cloth of Gold (1520), when he stands at the Cardinal's side in the Cathedral at Amiens during the signature of the treaty of peace between France and England (1527), or himself, as minister plenipotentiary, signs the treaty of peace of Cambray (1529), he is still skirting the leading parts without ever taking his stand in the centre of the stage. The barrister turned courtier at the king's importunity found it easy to adapt himself to this impersonal kind of work, and the philosopher of *Utopia*, well aware of the trust that may be put in princes, drew up treaties and signed official undertakings which others would take care to see broken. The man of letters relieved the pettiness of such a life by polishing the Latin speeches which the King bade him deliver on great occasions; and the Christian, by sweetly recalling, in the midst of all these earthly cares, the truths of the gospel. Sir Arthur Pole, having been unjustly treated by the Earl of Arundel, made a complaint to Henry VIII.; the king, in great anger, bade More write to the culprit very sternly. The *Letters and Papers* state simply that More thought it best to send him "a loving letter first." [1] It is unnecessary to add that More, as the depositary of other people's secrets, was more impenetrable than ever. More than once, foreign ambassadors wrote to their governments that they

[1] B. i. 170.

had tried in vain to make him speak. It was impossible, writes one of them, to get "the slightest hint." [1]

Another passage, taken from the Venetian despatches, shows how highly he was esteemed by all. In 1518, Wolsey had selected him and Richard Pace to negotiate the removal of a tax on wine. "They are," writes the Venetian ambassador, "the most sage, most virtuous, and most linked with myself of any in England. I suspect, however, that this promise will not be performed, because Pace is known to be devoted to the Signory and More to justice." [2]

The last phrase serves also to sum up that part of More's public life which entailed more initiative and independence. Even before he received the great seal, his position gave him a sort of upper hand over the administration of justice. His biographers, and among them Erasmus, naïvely insist on the conscientious integrity which was proof against every gift. Nisard relates that "after his fall, inquiries were made into his long judicial career to see if he had never received a present of sufficient value to justify a charge of corruption. With a single word, an anecdote, or a piece of rebutting evidence, More was able to dispel every charge brought against him, and put to shame the plaintiffs suborned by the Court. Now it was a lady who had sent him money and gloves; granted, but it was only the gloves he kept, as it would be 'against good manners to forsake a gentlewoman's New Year's gift.' Now it was a client who had sent a richly chased gold

[1] B. i. 169. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 166.

cup; true, but he had presented him in return with a more valuable cup, as he did not wish to receive presents, and could not resist the pleasure of keeping the fine piece of chasing.

"The gravest charge was brought by one Parnell, and was preferred by Anne Boleyn's father, the Marquis of Wiltshire, a mortal enemy of More's, and one of the King's instruments, who was not ashamed to expose his share in this monstrous exhibition of retrospective justice. Parnell complained bitterly of having lost a case against one Vaughan, whose wife, he declared, had given More a magnificent silver-gilt cup. More, writes Roper, 'forthwith confessed that forasmuch as that cup was, long after the foresaid decree, brought him for a New Year's gift, he, upon her importunate pressing upon him thereof, of courtesy refused not to receive it. Then the Lord of Wiltshire, . . . with much rejoicing, said unto the lords: 'So, my lords, did I not tell you, my lords, that you should find this matter true?' The judges, who looked to the Court for their fees, had already stood up to condemn him, when More 'desired their lordships that, as they had heard him courteously tell the one part of his tale, so that they would vouchsafe of their honours indifferently to hear the other.' After which obtained, he farther declared unto them, that albeit he had indeed with much work received that cup, yet immediately thereupon caused he his butler to fill it with wine, and of that cup drank to her, and that when he had so done and she pledged him, then as freely as her husband had given it to him even so

freely gave he the same again to her to give unto her husband for his New Year's gift; which, at his instant request, though much against her will, at length yet she was fain to receive, as herself and certain others there present before them deposed." The judges, the plaintiff, and the Marquis were dumfounded; More had been unable to resist the pleasure of raising their hopes by his first statement in order to dash them the more by his explanation.

Nisard continues: "The new Chancellor set in motion all the cases that were standing over, and gave a powerful and useful impulsion to every branch of the judicature, which, for want of a controlling force, were all grown slack. The magisterial virtues of probity, integrity, and vigilance were never carried to a higher pitch than by him. In more settled times, when promptitude and certainty in the judgment of cases would have been considered of paramount importance in a vast state, More's administration would have been sufficiently useful and honourable to win him the recognition of his right to be relieved of all other business. But, as men's minds and civilisation were then, his application to the duties of his office was not appreciated, and no one gave him any credit for it, except possibly some few clients who were pining for a settlement of their cases, and whom More rescued from the hands of the courts below. The nation, which wanted him elsewhere, hardly thanked him for services he had not been asked to perform.

"In cases where law and common-sense agreed, More showed the only quality demanded of an

officer of justice, promptitude. In cases where common-sense and law were in opposition, he tempered each with the other. In unforeseen cases, he exercised a kind of ingenious equity, like Solomon's, which was rather shrewd than exalted, and had, if we may say so, a touch of the rustic about it. The instances given show his wit to have had an antique flavour. A fine dog had been stolen from a poor woman and sold to Lady More. The animal's real mistress, learning where he was, appeared before the Chancellor, then sitting in court, and complained that Lady More was detaining her dog. The Chancellor immediately bade summon his wife. Taking the dog in his hands, and placing Lady More at the upper end of the hall, on account of her rank, and the poor woman at the lower end, he ordered them both to call the dog. On hearing the voice of his first mistress the animal ran straight to her. 'The dog does not belong to you,' said More to his wife; 'you must do without it.' And when his wife protested against his decision, the Chancellor bought the dog for three times its value, and every one was pleased.

"While still under-sheriff of the city of London, he had remarked at the Newgate sessions an old judge who always blamed the people who had had their purses stolen, telling them it was their fault that so many cases of thieving came before the assizes. More sent for one of the cleverest thieves in Newgate prison, and promised to defend him if he would steal the old judge's purse at the next day's sitting of the court. The thief consented.

His case came on at the beginning of the morrow's sitting. He declared himself confident of proving his innocence if he might have leave to speak to one of the judges in private. On being asked which, he indicated the old judge who blamed the victims of theft. In those days the purse was worn suspended from the belt. While pleading in the judge's ear and keeping his attention fixed, he neatly cut off his purse, and came back to his place with an air of great solemnity. Then More addressed the court. He asked the judges of their charity to give alms to a poor wretch who was present, and himself set the example. The hands of all the bench went to their purses, and the old judge, finding that his was gone, cried out that he had been robbed. 'What,' cried More, jesting, 'would you accuse us of having robbed you?' The judge began to get angry. More summoned the thief, took the purse from him, and restoring it to the old judge: 'I would counsel you,' said he, 'to be less severe on the poor folk who have their purses stolen, since you let your own be taken before the whole court.'" [1]

These tales are unfortunately the most definite information that survives on the public life of the author of *Utopia*. My first intention was to sum them up in two lines, until I reflected that it would be far more telling to quote them at full length from a grave professor of the Sorbonne. More, who had no faith in human glory, would have relished the irony of it.

The story of the Chancellor's dealings with the

[1] Nisard, *Études sur la Renaissance, Thomas More*, vii.

first English Protestants also properly belongs to this chapter. It is, indeed, the most important part of it, but by reason of that very importance it deserves to be treated separately and in some detail.

# CHAPTER V

## THOMAS MORE AND THE LUTHERAN INVASION

An non clementer odit impios, qui quum habeat jus occidendi, ita studet mederi vitiis, ut homines ipsi sint incolumes. . . . Et supremum Angliae judicem volebant connivere donec impune talis colluvies inundaret in regnum, et opibus et ingeniis et religione cum primis florens. . . . Nemo pius non optat ecclesiae mores emendatos; at nemo prudens existimat recipiendam rerum omnium confusionem (Erasmus, *J. Fabio episcopo Viennensi*).[1]

WHEN Henry VIII. published his book against Luther in 1521, and two years later, when More issued his *Vindicatio Henrici VIII. a calumniis Lutheri*[2] under the pseudonym of G. Rosseus, there was no appearance of serious menace to the Church of England from Lutheranism. The ideas of the German monk, however, were beginning to creep into the two ancient universities. About 1525 people were said, in the slang of Cambridge, to go to Germany when they went to the "White Horse" tavern to discuss, among the initiated, the reform of the Church. On December 24, 1525, Robert Barns, the prior of the Augustines in the town, preached a sermon against the "special observances" of the

[1] Erasmus, *Epist.*, London, p. 1506.

[2] This work is commonly attributed to More; *cf.* B. i. 222.

feast of Christmas. But anything like a popular movement appeared to be still a long way off, when the appearance of Tyndale's *New Testament* made the danger grave and pressing.[1]

Tyndale was Luther's earliest lieutenant, the first missionary of the infant heresy in England. I can only regret that the scope of this little book prevents my dwelling at leisure on this singular figure. In the early stages, at any rate, he was scrupulous in going to Germany to receive or renew his orders, and it is not always easy to distinguish, either in his life or his writings, what is properly his from what he drew from his master. Whether it were he or Luther who had the first clear intuition of the forces of revolutionary mysticism that were ever ready to ferment in the English people, I should not like to say; but in any case Tyndale displayed real genius in the anarchic propaganda. With a great power of rousing ideas and polemic ability of the highest order, he had the dry and vigorous eloquence of men of narrowly logical minds who can push on their work of destruction without a tremor of respect or pity to unsteady their hands. Only once does he show a touch of tenderness, in a letter full of haughty humility which he wrote to Frith, his most attractive, indeed his only attractive disciple. In reading these indomitable words, a Frenchman cannot help thinking, against his own will, of the great Arnaud and of Pascal. Frith was in prison,

[1] Gairdner, *A History of the English Church, from Henry VIII. to Mary*, pp. 89, 90, and chap. x; Gasquet, *The Eve of the Reformation*, chap. vii.

and Tyndale, who had not long to live, encourages him to be staunch, and develops his plan of campaign.[1] In truth, these heretics were mighty agitators. They scatter their seditious pamphlets far and wide as freely as nowadays we scatter advertisements. "They send them hither," wrote More, "by the whole fat[2]-full at once, and in some places, looking for no lucre, cast them abroad by night."[3]

In these pamphlets the whole edifice of the old faith was violently undermined. There was to be one sole authority, the Bible. Armed with that book, the meanest peasant might hold his own against the most learned theologian. More, it was the duty of every man to take up the war against the reigning superstition. To break a crucifix or force open a tabernacle was a work of piety; and if the executioner appears on the scene, the joyful "brethren" hail the stake or the gallows with the enthusiasm of martyrs.

It is clear that we are no longer dealing with a handful of men of intellect playing at reformers in a Cambridge inn. The deadly doctrine is winding its way through the crowd, seizing in its toils the simple and passionate souls who know nothing of fine distinctions, and are turned in an instant by a single half-comprehended idea into men of conviction on fire to carry out their belief in action. And, finally, that the gravity of the circumstances may be com-

[1] Tyndale's Works, published by the Parker Society, i. p. liii.

[2] *i.e.* barrel or bale.

[3] *English Works*, pp. 341-44.

plete, the king himself ere long begins secretly to encourage the revolt against the Church.[1] From every quarter comes the roar of schism, and there is only just time to think of resistance.

## II

Unhappily, with the exception of a few priests and the noble Bishop of Rochester, one of the greatest saints of modern times, most of the natural defenders of the faith did not seem to grasp the danger. But a layman was on the watch. So long as politics alone were concerned More had no difficulty in resigning himself to hold his high office simply as a depositary of others' orders; but now that souls were at stake, his duty appeared to him independent of external command. The artist in letters, who had hitherto occupied his mind in describing the island of Utopia and turning elegant Latin verses, set to work to reply with all his erudition and spirit to the enemy's pamphlets; and at the same time, until the king should raise his mask, the Chancellor used every means offered him by the law to arrest the heretical propaganda. The grand-justiciar of the kingdom, he lent the support of the "secular arm" to the threatened Church. The obligation to do so seemed to him rigorous and indisputable, and he would be none too pleased to find us defending him against himself by the insinuation that so true a liberal and one so far in advance

[1] Gairdner, *ibid.*

of the ideas of his age must have lent himself with regret to the application of the ancient public right that had still the force of law. "As touching heretics, I hate that vice of theirs and not their persons, and very fain would I that the one were destroyed and the other saved. But that I have toward no man any other mind than this—how loudly soever these blessed new brethren and professors and preachers of heresy belie me—if all the favour and pity that I have used among them to their amendment were known, it would, I warrant you, well and plain appear; whereof, if it were requisite, I could bring forth witnesses more than men would ween.

"Howbeit, because it were neither right nor honesty that any man should look for more thank than he deserveth, I will that all the world wit it on the other side, that whoso be so deeply grounded in malice, to the harm of his own soul and other men's too, and so set upon the sowing of seditious heresies, that no good means that men may use unto him can pull that malicious folly out of his poisoned, proud, obstinate heart, I would rather be content that he were gone in time, than overlong to tarry to the destruction of other." [1]

"That he were gone in time." The veiled periphrasis betrays the hand of the man of letters; but if the dread word is not actually launched, there is no mistaking the meaning. There we see what Nisard calls the "terrible body of doctrine," and then, beyond question, some spots of blood on the ermine of Sir Thomas More.

[1] *Apology*, cap. xlix.; B. i. 255.

## III

We have travelled far, it seems, from the precious little book of *Utopia,* the earliest gospel of the modern idea of tolerance. King Utopus, indeed, finding his island torn by religious factions, put an end to the disorder by proclaiming absolute liberty of conscience. And in doing so, says More, whom I am here broadly summing up, he intended to act not solely for the sake of peace, but also in the interests of religion itself. Who can tell, to start with, that this variety of cults was against the will of God; and, in the second place, is it not impertinent and absurd to try and force one's own point of view upon other people by threats and violence? Even supposing that there should be one sole true religion,[1] the natural force of truth would break down all obstacles by degrees, and the light would soon shine forth of its own radiance in men of good will and free from prejudice.

There was one exception only to limit this universal liberty. Whoever did not believe in the life to come was dismissed from all office and given over to the public hatred. But even then all violent measures were illegal, for in that country "they be pursuaded that it is in no man's power to believe what he list."

Nothing can be plainer than these wise laws;

[1] The gospel had not been preached in Utopia.

they are the necessary charter of every society in which doctrinal unity has been broken. But we must understand them very ill to find in them a condemnation by anticipation of the attitude of Sir Thomas More. On the eve of the Lutheran invasion, England, so far from being broken up into a thousand discordant sects, unanimously accepted a single rule of faith. Moreover, the heretics had no mind to be content with the weapons of peace in the war they were declaring on the established order. Less subtle than our modern persecutors, they, at any rate, did not pride themselves on their tolerance. "Tie these holy idle thieves to the carts," wrote Fish of the monks, "to be whipped naked about every market town."[1] The rest of the programme was to be on similar lines. Finally, and perhaps chiefly, the peace of religion was not the only thing troubled by these apostles of the new gospel. They menaced also, and of inevitable consequence, the whole of the social order. The war of the peasants in Germany recalled to More's mind the atrocities his own country had suffered in the days of the Lollards, and he foresaw with surprising precision the catastrophes that must follow the triumph of the new revolution. What is there to add? As I close this passage, which, after all, is very like a speech for the defence, I cannot help wondering what More would have thought of this modern feebleness of ours. We have not learned even yet that the worst malefactors in the world are the apostles of anarchy.

[1] Simon Fish, *A Supplication for the Beggars*, 1529 (Arber Reprint, 1878, p. 13).

Impenitent liberals that we are, though possibly somewhat lukewarm, we still blush if any one lays a finger on the sacred rights of free thought, and we take no heed of the fact that with our would-be tolerance we play straight into the hands of the most dangerous enemies of liberty.

There is no call, then, to recognise any contradiction between the theories of the philosopher and the practice of the chancellor. The inconsistency, if any there be, lay elsewhere, and shall be pointed out at once.

Here is a flagrant case of it. More was in power. The moment had come, therefore, for him to strike a blow for the Church and make the heretics to vanish. What actually happened? Froude, it is true, informs us that no sooner was Wolsey disgraced than the fires of Smithfield were rekindled, but Froude had a genius for inaccuracy. The truth is, on the contrary, that one year and then another went by, with no sign of smoke at Smithfield, and not a single heretic condemned to death. And the reason was, not that they had become prudent and succeeded in escaping More's vigilance, but that all the suspected persons who came before the Chancellor he sent on, if he failed to dissuade them from their errors himself, to the bishops, who, under a recent decree, had power to imprison heretics. His own words give a good idea of the way he conducted these interrogatories.

"Whom . . . I sent for. And when I had spoken with him, and honestly entreated him one day or twain in mine house, and laboured about his

amendment in as hearty loving manner as I could. . . ."[1]

There was another, named Silver. After examining him, More said to him with his customary humour: "Silver must be tried by the fire." "Ay," said Silver, "but quicksilver will not abide it;"[2] and More, holding that a man of wit could not be a dangerous fanatic, absolved him and let him go.[3] Later, when More himself was on his trial, a number of people petitioned not against him, but against the bishops with whom he had agreed to save them from death, alleging too severe imprisonment. But even at such a moment, when Cromwell and the rest were on the watch for any additional charge to bring against him, both the Lords and the Council were obliged to acknowledge that the complaints of these condemned persons were inadmissible, and that if he was guilty of any offence with regard to them, it was that of excessive leniency; "that he was too easily dealt with and had wrong that he was no worse served."[4]

During the last months of More's administration there were four executions. It is quite possible that the number is overstated,[5] and in any case, the

[1] *English Works*, p. 905. On the same page More remarks that "albeit that he said that the clergy loved him not (he) seemed not yet very loth to go to the bishop's prison."

[2] Hutton, p. 221. [3] *Ibid.* [4] B. i. 270.

[5] Erasmus, it is true, says that under More's government no one lost his life for the new faith, and Nisard writes: "I know that Thomas More never slew!" (p. 246). But it seems to be proved that Th. Hilton was executed on the 23rd February 1530, and Th. Bilney, R. Bayfield, and J. Tewkesbury in 1531. *Cf.* Gairdner, pp. 129-32. It remains to be questioned whether

sufferers being men who after being once absolved and reconciled to the Church had then relapsed and resumed their propaganda, the law was precise and the Chancellor had no power to pardon them. But I certainly have no wish to romanticise history myself, and insinuate that when More countersigned the warrants, however it came about that he did so, he was bound to experience the scruples of a modern jury. In those days common thieves were punished with death without a thought. On principle the law had the entire approbation of the Chancellor, and in punishing the crime of heresy he believed himself to be doing his duty neither more nor less than when he sent a murderer to the gallows. I would only remark that, before the final condemnation, he was so far from being enraged with the guilty that he tried every possible chance of safety in their favour, and remind my readers that the last prayer of the condemned men was but one more act of homage to the humanity of the Chancellor: "God, open the eyes of Sir Thomas More!"[1]

a loyal subject is at liberty to say that a minister of justice "slays" a condemned man whom he delivers up to execution in accordance with the verdict of the assizes.

[1] The reader may notice a slight hesitation in this paragraph. The reason of it is that I am not quite able to determine the exact responsibility of the Chancellor in these four executions. Legally, as the condemned were backsliders, the sentence of the bishop was equivalent to a death-sentence. May we suppose that in practice there was a last appeal in such cases to the royal mercy; and, if there were any precedent for such a proceeding, did More think of applying it? I should not like to say, and my own opinion inclines rather to the negative. It was at Chelsea, in More's house, that the Bishop of London condemned Tewkesbury.

## IV

Their friends were less honest. They went about declaring that the examination of the martyrs in the garden at Chelsea was accompanied by shocking cruelties. They were tied to trees and beaten till the blood came. Meanwhile, if any money fell from their pockets, the avaricious Chancellor was not above seizing the windfall. Having whetted his appetite with this delightful prelude, he followed his unhappy victims to the Tower, to gloat over the spectacle of their sufferings. Thirty years after More's death, Foxe collected these lies in his Protestant martyrology and established the legend of the bloody Chancellor which the gravest historians have religiously accepted. The legend descended to the days of Froude, who in repeating it bewails the fact that the spirit of persecution can thus "co-exist with the fairest graces of the human character."[1]

Fortunately More himself—who might easily have been consulted—has replied to these calumnies in advance, and made his confession before the public with a tranquil good-nature that commands confidence.

"What cannot these brethren say that can be so shameless to say thus? For of very truth, albeit that for a great robbery or a heinous murder . . . I caused sometimes such things to be done by some officers of the Marshalsea, or of some other prisons, with which ordering of them . . . I found out and repressed many such desperate wretches as else had

[1] *History of England*, ii. p. 73.

not failed to have gone farther; yet saving the sure keeping of heretics, I never did cause any such thing to be done to any of them in all my life, except only twain. Of which the one was a child and a servant of mine in mine own house, whom his father had, ere ever he came with me, nursled up in such matters, and had set him to attend upon George Jaye or Gee, otherwise called Clerk, which is a priest, and is now for all that wedded in Antwerp, into whose house then the two nuns were brought which John Birt, otherwise called Adrian, stole out of their cloister to make them harlots. This George Jaye did teach this child ungracious heresy against the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, which heresy this child afterwards, being in service with me, began to teach another child in my house, which uttered his counsel. And upon that point perceived, I caused a servant of mine to stripe him like a child before mine household, for amendment of himself and an example of such other."

The other was a Protestant who had gone mad and been confined in Bedlam. On his release, he took to brawling in churches during the offices and committing acts of great indecency. More had him arrested by the police, tied to a tree in the street, and beaten with a birch. That was sufficient, he adds, "to beat his remembrance home"; he promised to be wise, and no more was heard of him.

"And of all that ever came in my hand for heresy, . . . had never any of them any stripe or stroke given them, so much as a fillip on the forehead."[1]

[1] *Apology*, cap. xxxvi.; B. i.267, 268.

"These are sacred words," adds Nisard, after giving a full translation of this evidence, which is the corner-stone of his work on Thomas More. In his introduction he had written as follows: "If I say that the discovery of this confession made me as happy for several days as a happy family event, my delight will be understood and my good fortune envied."[1] The naïve emotion of so upright a man checks the smile on our lips, but we are compelled at last to remark that his passionate desire to prove that More "never slew" has led the excellent Nisard astray. More is replying here to a particular accusation, and is merely defending himself on the charge of having ill-treated the heretics brought before his tribunal. It is clear, too, that his statement is sufficient to settle this historical point.

"Howbeit, what faith my words will have with him (*i.e.* his anonymous accuser), in these mine own causes I cannot very surely say, nor yet very greatly care. And yet stand I not in so much doubt of myself, but that I trust well that among many good and honest men . . . mine own word would alone, even in mine own cause, be somewhat better believed than would the oaths of some twain of this new brotherhood in a matter of another man."[2]

## V

More as author deserves a separate study, but I must say a few words here on his controversial

[1] Pp. 240, 243. Unfortunately Nisard is very rhetorical all through the chapter. The idea of it is to show "the noble struggle . . . between nature and the law," in More's conscience.

[2] *Apology*, cap. xxxvi.

writings. They have been bitterly criticised, and men who have obviously never read them have reproached him with equalling his adversaries in coarseness and violence. The accusation will not stand for a moment. More, as polemic, is certainly without pity, not only for the errors, but often for the persons he is attacking, and he rarely refrains from his fill of gibing at the private disorders of the "Evangelicals." But he himself confesses his inability to give them a full reply in their own language.

"If any of them use their words at their pleasure, as evil and as villainous as they list, against myself, I am content to forbear any requiting thereof, and give them no worse words again than if they speak me fair. For all shall be one to me, or rather the worse the better. For the pleasant oil of heretics cast upon mine head can do my mind no pleasure, but contrariwise, the worse that such folk write of me, for hatred that they bear to the Catholic Church and faith, the greater pleasure, as for my own part, they do me. But surely their railing against all other I purpose not to bear so patiently, as to forbear to let them hear some part of like language as they speak. Howbeit utterly to match them therein, I neither can though I would, nor will neither though I could, but am content, as I needs must, to give them therein the mastery, wherein to match them were more rebuke than honesty."[1]

He knew therefore how far the liberty of the pen might go, and the limits which a Christian and

[1] B. i. 296; *Apology*, cap. ix.

a gentleman must not pass. Whether he allowed himself too much licence, or whether in the heat of his passion he overstepped the bounds he had laid down, is a delicate question, and one which a proper understanding of it makes one hesitate to open.

Here and there we find phrases that startle, and in particular, a certain passage in Latin on the sources of the inspiration of Luther. But it is well known that in those days the most refined stood very little on ceremony. As to the personal controversy which often approaches and sometimes reaches insult, contemporary licence is not a sufficient excuse for such a man as More. But here again, can any one decide where the rights and necessities of polemics in 1530 began and ended? In writings of this kind, More was properly doing the work of a journalist. He was not addressing people of refinement, but the vulgar herd, which was stirred up every day by filthy pamphlets, not against ideas but against persons.

With a public of that kind, it was not enough to be right—indeed, with what public is it enough? The best argument in the world is nothing compared with a biting repartee, a direct and decisive blow that makes the assailant look ridiculous. And further, disgust can reach a point at which it becomes untranslatable into measured words. Let those of us whose tongues have never burned with a brutal epithet in the presence of certain renegades and public malefactors, cast the first stone at Sir Thomas More. For my own part, I could not; but

the fact remains that I have no hesitation in agreeing with Brewer that certain passages in these writings pain me "like the misconduct of a dear friend. For round no man in this great reign," he writes, "do our sympathies gather so strongly as round More; in no man is humanity with its various modes, — its sun and shadow, its gentleness and kindliness, its sorrows and misgivings,—so attractively presented as in More. But this was precisely the danger, the fatal danger to which men of More's temperament were exposed by Luther's heedless and unnecessary violence. They turned away in disgust from doctrines defended in such a style, in a temper so impatient and so arrogant."[1] On the actual point of doctrine, it is impossible to find admiration enough for the theological instinct of the controversialist. Stapleton, a brother of the craft, is a sure warranty: "*ita ad verae theologiae normam loqui ut accuratius et aptius professione theologus vix loqui possit.*"[2] The tactics he usually adopted are extremely clever. While he never neglects to reply to particular attacks in detail, he constantly returns to the essential truth which ruins *a priori* the whole system of the heretics, the necessity of a living and infallible rule of faith. To Tyndale brandishing his Bible he opposes the "unwritten verities" that are the source of the doctrinal

[1] *Letters and Papers*, iii. ccccxxix.

[2] Cap. iv. The *vix* saves the honour of the professional theologians or the elegance of the period, but it is quite probable that close study would reveal certain inaccuracies of detail in an entirely extemporaneous work of such length.

and liturgical development of the Church. "If ye will believe whatsoever More can feign without the Scripture, then can this poet" (a damning charge in Tyndale's eyes) "feign you another Church than Christ's."[1] Thus Tyndale, but More clings no less firmly to the real book of the faith, written in the heart of the whole Catholic Church,[2] the living Bible which preserves tradition and has its meaning fixed by the doctrinal authority of the Church.

There is consolation in the thought that some of the ministers of that Church, bishops and priests of England, wished to acknowledge by a public act of homage the services rendered to the cause of the faith by this layman. The Chancellor, after his disgrace, was not rich. The clergy clubbed together to present him with a sum of more than £4000. The Bishops of Durham, Bath, and Exeter were charged to make the presentation, and More himself, in replying to those who accused him of having made money by his pen, has related the course of the interview.

"I dare take God and the clergy to record that they could never fee me with one penny thereof; but as I plainly told them I would rather have cast their money into the Thames than take it. For albeit they were good men and honourable, yet look I for my thanks of God that is their better, and for whose sake I take the labour and not for theirs. . . . I am both over proud and slothful also, to be hired

[1] Tyndale, Parker Society, iii. 231.
[2] *English Works*, p. 488.

for money to take half the labour and business in writing, that I have taken in this year since I began."[1] "The bishops," adds, Roper, "thus departing, were fain to restore unto every man his own again."

[1] B. i. 312; *Apology*, cap. x.

# CHAPTER VI

## THE WRITER

I beseech your Grace, pardon me: I was born to speak all mirth and no matter (*Much Ado about Nothing*, II. i.).

THOMAS MORE wrote a good deal. With better inspiration than Erasmus, he was not content with the supple and living Latin which has won a European reputation for *Utopia* as great as that of the *Encomium Moriae*. He wished to make use of his native language also. The English prose of that date was still stammering like a child, and no master had yet arisen to rid it of its swaddling-clothes. For all that, it was there at hand, within reach of his pen, and a sure instinct told More that he might mould the infant language to all his humanistic elegancies, the caprices of his humour and his convictions as a Christian. While still all but a child he wrote *A Merry Tale* in very poor verse, and next some mottoes, also only second-rate, but containing here and there a note of the choice music which real poets were soon to immortalise.

"Fast by her side doth weary Labour stand"—

Spenser might have signed that line. In 1510, at the age of thirty-two, More translated into English

the life of Pico della Mirandola. On reaching the end of the book he found the muse still plaguing him, and applied to the "love of God," in a series of pious verses, the "twelve rules of the perfect lover." In 1513 he began a life of Richard III., the first history ever written in English. Between 1516 and 1520 came the principal Latin works. *Utopia* (1516), the open letters in support of Erasmus (1516, 1520), the letter to the University of Oxford on the study of Greek (1518), the Epigrams (1518), and the reply to Luther (1523). Meanwhile the friend of Erasmus had become a politician. He was now too busy, too much occupied with real life and the national life, not to give up the tongue of the humanists. Moreover, it was among the lower classes that the first Protestants poured their books of propaganda by thousands. More replied to them in English. Every new work found him ready with the counter-thrust: in 1528 he published the *Dialogue;* in 1529 he answered the *Supplication for the Beggars* with the *Supplication of Souls in Purgatory;* in 1531 he confuted Tyndale; in 1532, Frith. In the following year he published his *Apology*. Then he learned that in various quarters they were preparing to confute him.

"Like as a husband," he wrote, "whose wife were in her travail, hearkeneth and would fain hear good tidings, so, since I so much heard of so sore travail of so many, I longed of their long labour to see some good speed and some of those fair babes born. And when these great hills had thus travailed long, from the week after Easter till as much before Michael-

mas, the good hour came on as God would that one was brought a-bed with sore labour at last delivered of a dead mouse. The mother is yet but green, good soul, and hath need of good keeping."[1] The Mouse was a dialogue entitled *Salem and Bysance*. In less than a month More's answer was written and printed (1533); then he began another book on the Eucharist, but had not time to finish it. By great good fortune he had ink and pens in the Tower, and if the pens ran short, it was still possible to write with a coal.

More was an author to the backbone; he wrote till the very end. But it is important to observe that, whether his Latin were grown rusty, or whether, with death so near at hand, he wished to avoid even the shadow of an artificial elegance, the fact remains that he forgot, or tried to forget, the Latin tongue he had mastered with such labour, and chose English as the vehicle for the work into which he put the most of himself, the *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, which comes very near to deserving a place among the finest books of devotion. This dialogue brings to a close the stout blackletter quarto of fifteen hundred double-column pages which contains the English Works of Thomas More. The *Opera latina* fill as big a volume—a noble literary output for a man who was an author only in his spare moments and scarcely ever enjoyed any leisure until the months of imprisonment that preceded his martyrdom.

He was an author, clearly enough, only in his

[1] *English Works*, p. 930.

spare moments, but he was an author in the full force of the word. An amateur of style and a literary epicure, he had so much taste for the craft that, independently of all other information, his books are the best means of penetrating deeper into his being. And for this reason no life of him would be complete without a literary study of Thomas More, the man of letters.

## II

Literary work, however excellent it may be in other respects, cannot fail to lack a certain higher perfection, unless it is undertaken and carried on with a natural delight. More always enjoyed writing, whether for duty or merely for his own pleasure; and that is one of the reasons why on the most serious subjects, and neither in English nor even in Latin, does he ever become wearisome. The search for the right word, the picturesque epithet, the movement of thought that gathers precision and volume under the pen, the struggle with a phrase that is finally mastered, and the consciousness that it will go straight to the mark, the unexpected strokes of luck, all the evolution of a style that controls the author as much as he controls it, interested and attracted him; and so perhaps still more did the uncertainty, the surprise, and the delightful defeat of the reader whom he was addressing and whom he had constantly before his mind. He never loses sight of the reader. Not that he worries

him, like some writers who never give us breathing-space. He was both too cautious and too good-natured to be always pressing, but he has an eye on his readers all the time, follows his thoughts in their eyes, guesses their hesitation and the first glimmer of a response, the disconcerting effect of some trap not discovered at once, the success of an anecdote or an epigram. The fascination of his books, like that of his portrait, lies in keeping us under the enigma of his smile. We cannot tell where he is in earnest and where he begins to jest. It is our business to find out. More himself is never so pleased as when we have guessed wrong and taken a joke or a flash of humour seriously. He would have been hugely delighted to know that a day would come when a poet and a fellow-countryman, William Morris, would discover in *Utopia* a gospel of socialism. The mistake would have struck him as so funny that he would have taken good care not to dispel it. He must have been charmed, too, when certain simple souls, seized with admiration and pity for the inhabitants of Utopia, talked of chartering a ship and sending out missionaries.

"The true notion of Utopia is, however," writes Sir James Mackintosh, "that it intimates a variety of doctrines, and exhibits a multiplicity of projects which the writer regards with almost every possible degree of approbation and shade of assent, from the frontiers of serious and entire belief, through gradations of descending plausibility, where the lowest are scarcely more than the exercises of ingenuity, and to which some wild paradoxes are

appended, either as vehicle, or as an easy means (if necessary) of disavowing the serious intention of the whole of this Platonic fiction." It is useless to add that all More's pleasure would have been spoiled if he had taken us into his confidence on the degree of seriousness he attached to each of his theories. In literature as in life he is always the man whose own wife, as Stapleton tells us, never knew *serione aut joco aliquid diceret*, whether he said a thing in jest or earnest.[1]

Like his book on the *Undiscoverable Isle*, the *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* is a work of fiction. Two honest Hungarians, Antonio, an old man, and his nephew Vincent, are discussing the approaching invasion of the Turks, and arming themselves with tranquillity against the imminent catastrophe. We, who know the end of the story, feel a thrill every time the Grand Turk appears on the page. We know the tyrant's name. But More takes a special pleasure in the pathetic *équivoque;* he smiles at his own idea and contents himself with adding in a quiet little parenthesis: "There is no born Turk so cruel to Christian folk as is the false Christian that falleth from the faith."

Sometimes, even in the middle of the gravest controversy, the mystification goes further.

"Since the time that Tindale hath begun his heresies and sent his erroneous books about, calling every Christian woman a priest, there is not now in some places of England the simplest woman in the parish, but that she doth, and that not in corners

[1] Stapleton, cap. xiii.

secretly, but look on who will, in open face of the world, in her own parish church, I say not hear but say her own self, and (lest you should look for some riddle) openly revested at the high altar, she saith (I say) herself and singeth too (if it be true that I hear reported) as many Masses in one week, as Tindale himself either saith or heareth in two whole years together."[1]

He is joking; he wants to give us a *reductio ad absurdum* of the heretical theories, and remind us that Tyndale never set foot in a church. But, meanwhile, if any worthy soul believes that in some places the villagers go in dozens robed in chasubles to sing Mass, the joke is fair, and More is not the man to despise it.

In a delightful chapter of his greatest spiritual work, he is caught in the act of giving way to his weakness for freaks of the imagination. It might have been written by La Fontaine, or, still better, by the author of the *Lettres de mon Moulin*, with just this difference, that, like a thorough Englishman and a grown-up child who sticks close to his story, More has not the courage—indeed, it never occurs to him—to be brief. He has just been speaking of scruples, a moral disease which his own clear conscience never caught, but the deplorable effects of which he had studied now and then in other people, particularly in his son-in-law, Roper. He wants to show that in the main it is better to be too sensitive than not sensitive enough; and it must be remembered that, throughout the conversation, the Turkish

[1] B. ii. 230.

force is menacing the Christian outposts, and that Cromwell is drawing up a new formula of faith.

"My mother had, when I was a little boy, a good old woman that took heed to her children; they called her Mother Maud. . . . She was wont, when she sat by the fire with us, to tell us that were children many childish tales. I remember one that among others of her fond tales she told us once, that the ass and the wolf came on a time to confession to the fox. The poor ass came to shrift in the Shrovetide . . . and had a marvellous grudge in his inward conscience, that he had one day given his master a cause of anger, in that, that with his rude roaring before his master arose, he had awakened him out of his sleep and bereaved him out of his rest. The fox for that fault, like a good discreet confessor, charged him to do so no more, but lie still and sleep like a good son himself, till his master were up. . . .

"To tell you all the poor ass's confession, it were a long work, for everything that he did was deadly sin with him, the poor soul was so scrupulous. But his wise wily confessor accounted them for trifles as they were, and sware afterward unto the badger that he was so weary to sit so long and hear him, that saving for the manners' sake, he had liever have sitten all the while at breakfast with a good fat goose. But when it came to the penance giving, the fox found that the most weighty sin in all his shrift was gluttony, and therefore he discreetly gave him in penance that he should never for greediness of his own meat do any other beast any harm or

hindrance, and then eat his meat and study for no more.

"Now, as good Mother Maud told us, when the wolf came to confession to good Father Reynard . . . upon Good Friday, his confessor shook his great pair of beads upon him almost as big as bowls, and asked him wherefore he came so late. 'Forsooth, Father Reynard,' quoth he, 'I must needs tell you the truth: I come (you wot well) therefor, I durst come no sooner, for fear lest you would for any gluttony have given me in penance to fast some part of this Lent.' 'Nay, nay,' quoth Father Fox, 'I am not so unreasonable: for I fast none of it myself. For I may say to thee, son, between us twain here in confession, it is no commandment of God this fasting, but an invention of man. . . . For I eat flesh all this Lent, myself. Howbeit, indeed, because I will not be occasion of slander, I therefore eat it secretly in my chamber, out of sight of all such foolish brethren as for their weak scrupulous conscience would wax offended withal, and so would I counsel you to do.'

"But when he heard after by his confession that he was so great a ravener, . . . then he prudently reproved that point in him. 'But,' said he, 'you have used it so long that I think you can do no other. . . . For live you must, I wot well, and other craft can you none. . . . But yet, you wot well, too much is too much, and measure is a merry mean. . . . And therefore, surely, this shall be your penance: that you shall all this year now pass upon yourself the price of sixpence at a meal.' . . .

"Their shrift have I showed you, as Mother Maud showed it us. But now serveth for our matter the conscience of them both, in the true performing of their penance. The poor ass after his shrift, when he waxed a hungered, saw a sow lie with her pigs well lapped in new straw, and near he drew and thought to have eaten of the straw. But anon his scrupulous conscience began therein to grudge him. For while his penance was, that for greediness of his meat he should do none other body harm, he thought he might not eat one straw thereof, lest for lack of that straw some of those pigs might hap to die for cold. So held he still his hunger till one brought him meat. But when he should fall thereto, then fell he yet in a far further scruple. . . . For he thought that if he eat not that meat, some other beast might hap to have it, and so should he by the eating of it peradventure hinder another. And thus stood he still fasting, till when he told the cause, his ghostly father came and informed him better, and then he cast off that scruple, and fell mannerly to his meat, and was a right honest ass many a fair day after."

As to the wolf, he was limited to sixpence, but how much could be had for the money was left entirely to his own conscience. "Yonder dead horse . . . in my conscience I set him far above sixpence, and, therefore, I dare not meddle with him. . . . But kine this country here hath enough, but money have they very little; and therefore . . . yonder cow seemeth to me in my conscience worth not past a groat, an she be worth so much. Now

then, as for her calf, is not so much as she by half . . . and so pass they not sixpence between them both." And so More takes leave reluctantly of the wolf and the ass, to tack on to his long story a short moral on the dangers of a scrupulous conscience.[1]

## III

The surprising thing is that this newly born English of his already sounds like a formed language. Now for the first time, breaking free at last from archaism, there appears in the world this rich mixture of Saxon and Latin, the English of Milton, of Addison, of Burke and Newman. The poorest scholar can understand these works with perfect ease to-day. A less consummate artist than Montaigne, and therefore not so constantly superior to the novices working for the same end all about him, More is nevertheless fully conscious of the nobility of his task, and sometimes he all but reaches the perfection of the greatest of those who were to come after. Tyndale had been guilty of mixing his metaphors, and this is how he handles him: "And this thing, though it be no great matter, yet I have thought good to give Tyndale warning of, because I would have him write true one way or other, that, though I cannot make him by no means to write true matter, I would have him yet at the leastwise write true English."[2]

[1] *Dialogue of Comfort.* [2] B. i. xvii.

He himself was already successfully working the inmost secret of English prose, the use of the particles which mould the verbs to new meanings, and so attain at once to precision and richness with a subtlety that defies translation.

"St John the Baptist was, ye wot well, in prison, while Herod and Herodias sat full merry at the feast, and the daughter of Herodias delighted them with her dancing, till *with her dancing she danced off St John's head.*"[1]

We find the same mastery in his management of adjectives—of course in the English manner. Whether, in France, our emotions are less vivid, or whether we are subject to an imperious need of analysis, the fact remains that we are not privileged to diaper our style with whole series of epithets connected by no conjunction. We cannot say, like More, that God, in order to bring back a coquette to His service, sent her "a goodly fair fervent fever"; and it is a pity, perhaps, that we are unable to pray the Divine Wisdom to lead our enemies, and ourselves with them, back to better thoughts "by such easy tender merciful means" as are better known to that Wisdom than to us.[2]

Thanks to the gentleness of style which we noted just now, More's phraseology is usually extended and ample, and is apt to drag a little; but it is never weighed down by solemnity. His prose is as copious as a written conversation; but as soon as the point of an epigram or the crispness of discussion demand it, it becomes suddenly condensed, and gives the

[1] B. ii. 80. [2] B. ii. 97.

impression of mingled fulness and finality which is the mark of a master.

Without any apparent effort, it takes on the finest and most subtle shades in proportion as it has to express the untranslatable; and I have noted, among others, a remarkable passage in which, wishing to show how exact and genuine the theology of simple believers can be, he speaks very happily of all that the ignorant may imply without expressing in their prayers, and of the depths for which there is no formula but a reverent, devout silence: "though not express, yet imply, and under a reverent, devout silence signify."[1] But criticism of this kind may take us too far and make us forget the master-quality of Sir Thomas More's writings, the supreme gift never granted to the most skilful stylists.

## IV

That gift is his humour, his spirit, his life. Reserved, gentle, and calm, with a hatred of all display, a perfect courtier who would have enjoyed less favour and kept fewer friends, but for the natural

[1] B. ii. 31. The rhythm, which is still rather Latin, or French, is also very interesting. Note the scansion of this delightful passage: "All which holy things, right many persons, very little learned, but yet in grace godly minded, with heart humble and religious, not arrogant, proud and curious, under the name of holy Housel with inward heavenly comfort, do full devoutly reverence." Four lines without a pronoun; the movement is at once pious and decided, and the close perfect.

benevolence that led him to listen and to go on listening even after his curiosity was satisfied, he was still intensely alive in mind, imagination, and heart. Under the peaceable irony of the surface circulated incessant activity, observation of all things and all men that met his eyes, the sudden revivification of old ideas by new images, and the spontaneous influx of untainted emotion, the swift rallying of all experience and all the forces of the soul round the subject that occupied him for the moment, the constant and supple exercise of a nature that was proof against all fever, that possessed itself by lavish giving of itself, and was on the watch for every new opportunity. His adversaries would do wisely to be careful what pleas they lodged, for More is matchless at seizing a chance. The obscure monk[1] who wrote to him attacking Erasmus, closed his letter with a promise that he would look favourably on the great humanist if he would but yet correct his blunders. "*Papae! beasti hominem*," cries More, "who indeed would have been in woful despair, if there had been no hope of his ever propitiating the favour of so great a man as you."[2]

Tyndale was rash enough to say that he could discern the Scriptures without the Church's help, as young eagles, when they leave the nest, swoop on their prey. More takes care not to let the comparison drop.

"He proveth his point by the ensample of a very

[1] More wished the name of this monk to remain unknown, and carefully kept it out of the letter he wrote.—Jortin, iii. p. 392.

[2] Jortin, iii. p. 393.

goodly bird and king of all fowls, the pleasant splayed eagle. For since that such a bird can spy his prey untaught . . . it must needs follow, *perdie!* that Tyndale and Luther in likewise, and Huskin and Zuinglius and other and excellent heretics, being in God's favour as far above all the Catholic Church as an eagle, the rich royal king of all birds, is above a poor puny chicken, must needs, without any learning of any man, be taught to know the true Scripture, being their prey to spoil and kill and devour it as they list. . . .

"But now ye see well, good readers, by this reason, that St Austin, in respect of these noble eagles that spy their prey without the means of the Church, was but a silly poor chicken. . . . But one thing is there that I cease not to marvel of, since God inspireth Tyndal and such other eagles, and thereby maketh them spy their prey themselves, how could it happen that the goodly golden old eagle, Martin Luther himself, in whose goodly golden nest the young eagle-bird was hatched, lacked that inspiration! . . .

"Howbeit I wis when our young eagle Tyndale learned to spy this prey first, he was not yet full-feathered, but scantily come out of the shell, not so high flickered in the air above all our heads . . . but was content to come down here and walk on the ground among other poor fowls, the poor children of his mother, of whom, when he hath all said, he learned to know this prey."[1]

A word, you see, is enough to set him off; and if the cat seems to play with the mouse a thought too

[1] B. ii. 231, 232; *English Works*, p. 684.

long, note how, even while having his fun, the writer is not marking time on one spot, and how the discussion is actually advanced by the pleasantry.

He tingles with life; and images, arguments, authorities, everything sets him in motion as soon as it crosses his thought.

"Yet have I another ancient sad father also, one that they call Origen. And when I desired him to come and bear witness with me in this matter, he seemed at the first very well content. But when I told him that he should meet with Tyndale, he blessed himself and shrank back, and said he had liever go some other way many a mile than once meddle with him. 'For I shall tell you, sir,' quoth he, 'before this time a right honourable man, very cunning and yet more virtuous, the good Bishop of Rochester, in a great audience, brought me in for a witness against Luther even in this same matter about the time of Tyndale's evil translated Testament. But Tyndale, as soon as he heard of my name, without any respect of honesty fell in a rage with me, and all too rated me, and called me stark heretic, and that the starkest that ever was.' This tale Origen told me, and swore by St Simkin that he was never so said unto of such a lewd fellow since he was first born of his mother. Fie, for shame! he should have favoured and forborne him somewhat, an it had been but for his age. For Origen is now thirteen hundred years old or thereabouts."[1]

In his writings, too, everything has the power of speech.

[1] B. ii. 193; *English Works*, p. 410.

"Oh! Cousin Vincent, if the whole world were animated with a reasonable soul (as Plato had weened it were) and that it had wit and understanding, to mark and perceive all things, Lord God, how the ground on which a prince buildeth his palace would loud laugh his lord to scorn, when he saw him proud of his possession, and heard him boast himself that he and his blood are for ever the very lords and owners of the land. For then would the ground think the while in himself: Ah! thou sealy poor soul, that weenest thou were half a God, and art amid thy glory but a man in a gay gown, I that am the ground here over whom thou art so proud, have had an hundred such owners of me as thou callest thyself, more than ever thou hast heard the names of. And some of them that proudly went over mine head, lie now low in my belly, and my side lieth over them. And many one shall as thou doest now, call himself mine owner after thee, that neither shall be sib to thy blood, nor any word hear of thy name. Who owned your castle, Cousin, three thousand years ago?"[1]

That is the reason why, even in the books which are not deliberately cast in the form of a long dialogue, he often enters on an imaginary conversation, seldom resisting the little drolleries which that form of writing makes room for more easily than any other, but quickly bringing these amusing digressions back into the line of the debate.

"And verily, were all the bishops of my mind (as I know some that be) ye should not of priests have

[1] *English Works*, p. 1219.

the plenty that ye have. . , . But were I Pope . . . By my soul, quoth he, I would ye were and my lady your wife Popess too. Well, quoth I, then should she devise for nuns. And as for me touching the choice of priests, I could not well devise better provisions than are by the laws of the Church provided already."[1]

Wit with us takes the form of a series of sparks, none of which, if isolated and put under glass, would have any meaning. English jesting is made of units of greater resisting power. In that grey land a good repartee is cultivated, selected, like a rare tulip. No sooner does it bloom than news of it is sent round, it is passed from hand to hand, until, somewhat embellished on the way, it is gathered by a writer. On that score too, Sir Thomas More is one of the earliest representatives of the national wit. Father Bridgett has collected into a single chapter the flower of the "Fancies, Sports, and Merry Tales," which Blessed Thomas More so sweetly excused himself for having scattered about his books.

"And one that is but a layman," he wrote, "as I am, it may better haply become him merrily to tell his mind, than seriously and solemnly to preach. And over this, I can scant believe that the brethren find any mirth in my books, for I have not much heard that they very merrily read them."[2]

A *bon mot* is untranslatable, but a "merry tale" can be thrown into a foreign tongue without losing all its flavour. And More's works are full of merry

[1] *English Works*, pp. 227, 228.
[2] B. ii. 183; *English Works*, p. 927.

tales. Charming examples are to be found even in his long Latin letters. Writing to Dorpius in defence of Erasmus, he crosses on his way the path of the pseudo-theologians who threw scorn on the study of the Fathers.

"It happened to me often that I met a man of that opinion in a bookseller's shop. He was an old man, with one foot in the grave, as we say, and the other to follow it very soon. . . . I happened to say before him that St Augustine believed that for a certain time the devils had bodies. Whereupon he frowned and turning on me as black as thunder, reproached me for my temerity. . . . 'Think you, indeed, I have never read Augustine? I have—and before you were born . . .!'"

"There was a copy of the *De Divinatione Demonum* in the shop. I found the passage and showed it him. He read and re-read it, and at the third time of reading beginning, not without my help, to understand it, he cried in amazement: 'Verily, I am much surprised that Augustine should so write in this passage; for he certainly does not say so in the *Magister Sententiarum, qui est liber magis magistralis quam iste*."[1]

A certain Richard Hunn, accused of heresy, had been found dead in prison. The official inquiry gave a verdict of suicide, but it was to the interest of the innovators to circulate another version. More had taken no part in the affair, but he refers to it on several occasions in his controversial works, and thereby gives us the benefit of several most spirited

[1] *Ad Dorp.* 31, B.C.D.

stories, which obviously enshrine his own judicial recollections. "The greatest temporal lord there present said unto a certain servant of his own standing there: 'Ye told me that one showed you that he could go take him by the sleeve that killed Hunn. Have ye brought him hither?' 'Sir,' quoth he, 'if it like your lordship, this man it was that told me so,' pointing to one that he had caused to come thither. Then my lord asked that man: 'How say ye, sir? can ye do as ye said ye could?' 'Forsooth, my lord,' quoth he, 'an it like your lordship, I said not so much; this gentleman did somewhat mistake me. But indeed I told him I had a neighbour that told me that he could do it.'"

But it then turned out to be the neighbour's neighbour. At last they came to a man who "said indeed that he knew one which he thought verily could tell who killed him."

"'Well,' quoth the lords at the last, 'with much work we come to somewhat. But whereby think you that he can tell?' 'Nay, forsooth, my lord,' quoth he, 'it is a woman. I would she were here with your lordships now.' 'Well,' quoth my lord, 'woman or man, all is one; she shall be had wheresoever she be.' 'By my faith, my lords,' quoth he, 'an she were with you she would tell you wonders, for by God . . . if a thing had been stolen she would have told who had it. I think she could as well tell who killed Hunn as who stole a horse.' . . . 'But how could she tell it, by the Devil?' 'Nay by my troth I trow not,' quoth he, 'for I could never see her use any worse way than looking in one's hand.' Therewith the

lords laughed and asked: 'What is she?' 'Forsooth, my lords,' quoth he, 'an Egyptian, and she was lodged here at Lambeth, but she is gone oversea now. Howbeit I trow she be not in her own country yet, for they say it is a great way hence, and she went over little more than a month ago.'"[1]

Then came another witness who declared that Hunn could not have hanged himself. It only needed a little experience to see that his corpse did not look like that of a man who had hanged himself.

"'I have occupied a great while under divers of the King's almoners, and have . . . seen so many by reason of mine office.' 'Why,' quoth another lord merrily, 'your office had no more experience in hanging than hath a hangman. And yet he cannot tell.' 'Nay, sir,' quoth he, 'an it like your lordship, he meddleth not with them that hang themselves as I do.' 'Well,' quoth one of the lords, 'how many of them have ye meddled with in your days?' 'With many, my lord,' quoth he, 'for I have been officer under two almoners, and therefore I have seen many?' 'Now how many?' quoth one of the lords. 'I cannot tell,' quoth he, 'how many, but I wot well I have seen many.' 'Have ye seen,' quoth one, 'a hundred?' 'Nay,' quoth he, 'not a hundred.' 'Have ye seen fourscore and ten?' Thereat a little he studied as one standing in doubt and that were loath to lie, and at last he said, that he thought nay not fully fourscore and ten. Then was he asked whether he had seen twenty, and thereat without any sticking he answered: 'Nay, not twenty.'

[1] *English Works*, p. 236.

Thereat the lords laughed well to see that he was so sure that he had not seen twenty, and was in doubt whether he had seen fourscore and ten. Then was he asked whether he had seen fifteen; and thereat he said shortly, 'Nay.' And in likewise of ten. At the last they came to five, and from five to four. And there he began to study again. Then came they to three, and then for shame he was fain to say that he had seen so many and more too. But when he was asked, when, whom, and in what place, necessity drove him at last unto the truth, whereby it appeared that he had never seen but one in all his life." [1]

These lively stories are, in a manner, confidences. The collector of medals and lover of strange animals was interested, above all things, in humanity, a never wearied, constantly amused spectator of the universal comedy. As barrister, judge, courtier, and minister, he was, no doubt, always in the front seats, but no one knew better how to look on, and no one was more interested in the play. We need hardly add that in his case his observation was never scornful, and that his keen sense of the ridiculous was tempered by benevolence and pity.

Moreover, his way of enlivening an abstract discussion is no mere trick of style. More's use of it shows great tactical wisdom, combined with obedience to the most characteristic tendency of the English mind.

The controversialists of his day, Henry VIII., the dull and dry, Fisher, already far more remarkable,

[1] *English Works*, p. 237.

and Tyndale himself, by no means to be despised as a writer, all remained faithful on the whole to the impersonal dialectic of the Schools. More, coming late into the field, had read the Schoolmen thoroughly, and invariably goes to them for matters of doctrine. But in the detail of his thought and the management of the debate, we find at every step the intrusion and the triumph of a concrete intellect, composed of plain common-sense, a preoccupation with morality, and the constant reduction of everything to the tangible and the real. He does not always reply to Tyndale's arguments, and yet he constantly opposes right reason to the reasoning of the man who had the imprudence to drive the people to verify the foundations of all belief for themselves. To cling to the abstract and consult the methods of religious philosophy at certain moments and before a certain public would be to throw dogma to the spoiler. More saw the danger instinctively, and without going back on its past, the liberal spirit that dreamed the dream of *Utopia* becomes the most pronounced conservative in the face of the heretics. He defends the threatened positions *en bloc*, and by concrete arguments that no subtleties can make a breach in. Dialectic is not altogether absent, but it has left off its doctorial robes, and instead of opposing argument to argument and reasoning to reasoning, it appeals to the common-sense of the people; it takes its stand on the implicit theology which centuries of religious life had instilled into the crowd; it jokes, and instead of syllogisms it scatters a plenteous store of good things and good stories.

"They that tell us that we shall be damned but if we believe right, and then tell us that we cannot know that but by the Scripture, and that the Scripture cannot be so learned but of a true teacher, and they tell us we cannot be sure of a true teacher, and so cannot be sure to understand it right, and yet say that God will damn us for understanding it wrong, or not understanding it at all; they that thus tell us put me in mind of a tale that they tell of Master Henry Patenson" (More's fool), "a man of known wisdom in London and almost everywhere else. Which when he waited once on his master in the Emperor's court at Bruges, and was there soon perceived upon the sight for a man of special wit by himself, and unlike the common sort, they caught a sport in angering of him, and out of divers corners hurled at him such things as angered him and hurt him not. Thereupon he gathered up good stones, not gunstones but hard as they, and these he put apace into his bosom, and then stood him up upon a bench, and made a proclamation aloud that every man might hear him, in which he commanded every man upon their own perils to depart . . . but whosoever tarried after his proclamation made he would take him for one of the hurlers, or else for one of their counsellers, and then have at their heads. . . .

"Now was his proclamation in English, and the company that heard him were such as understood none, but stood still and gaped upon him and laughed at him. And by-and-by one hurled at him again . . . and he hurled a great stone out at adventure among them, he neither wist nor sought at whom, but

lighted upon a Burgundian's head and brake his pate, that the blood ran about his ears; and master Henry bade him stand to his harms hardily, for why would he not beware then, and get him thence betime, when he gave him before so great courteous warning."[1]

## V

Thus in many fields More brilliantly opens the way for the literature of his country. And further, it is his glory to have, so to speak, wedded to the thoughts of faith and the experience of the Christian life, this English prose, which is one of the noblest, strongest, and sweetest tongues ever found by the gospel for the interpretation of its message.

Here again, as in the popular theology of his controversial books, we find no touch of novelty, nothing to remind us of the somewhat anxious searching and curiosity of *Utopia*. In writing against the innovators, he defends the truths of the catechism; in his spiritual works he never goes far from the great commonplaces of Christian preaching, especially the Last Things and the story of the Passion. As a religious writer, no less than as a humorist, a controversialist, or a teller of stories, he excels in his art and gives new life to all he touches; but his secret is exactly the same in each case. Sacred things are as vivid and as present with him as a

[1] *Confutation* of Tyndale, *English Works*, p. 767; B. ii. 194, 195.

nurse's tale or a judicial reminiscence; but with this difference, that his humour lay on the surface, while in the peaceful depths where it loved to meditate, his serene, grave soul was ever listening to the voice of God and holding herself ready to reply.

"Give me Thy grace, good Lord," he wrote in prison, ". . . to make death no stranger to me"; and the thought is linked, across all the years of his maturity, with the statement of the dear friend of his youth: "*Cum amicis sic fabulatur de vita futuri saeculi ut agnoscas illum ex animo loqui.*"

"For, of truth, our very prison this earth is: and yet thereof we cant us out (partly by covenants that we make among us, and part by fraud, and part by violence too), divers parts diversely to ourself, and change the name thereof from the odious name of prison and call it our own land and livelihood. Upon our prison we build, our prison we garnish with gold, and make it glorious. In this prison they buy and sell, in this prison they brawl and chide, in this prison they run together and fight; in this they dice, in this they card, in this they pipe and revel, in this they sing and dance. And in this prison many a man reputed right honest letteth not for his pleasure in the dark privily to play the knave.

"And thus while God the King, and our chief jailor too, suffereth us and letteth us alone, we ween ourself at liberty, and we abhor the state of those whom we call prisoners, taking ourselves for no prisoners at all."[1]

[1] *Dialogue of Comfort*, *English Works*, p. 1245; B. ii. 78, 79.

There are moments, it is true, when he dwells with strange eloquence on the horror of death, which he usually considered only as the beginning of life. More was not the man entirely to neglect the lessons of the great mistress of irony. In his meditation on the *Four Last Things*, he makes fun of the foolish people who leave directions in their wills for the ceremonial of their funerals.

Steeped in the thought of the centuries of faith, a heritage which even in his most enthusiastic transports of humanism he never dreamed of repudiating, he too wrote his *Triumph of Death*, and magnificent it is.

"We well know that there is no king so great, but that all the while he walketh here, walk he never so loose, ride he with never so strong an army for his defence, yet himself is very sure (though he seek in the mean season some other pastime to put it out of his mind)—yet is he very sure, I say, that scape he cannot; and very well he knoweth that he hath already sentence given upon him to die, and that verily die he shall, and that himself (though he hope upon long respite of his execution), yet can he not tell how soon. And therefore, but if he be a fool, he can never be without fear, that either on the morrow, or on the selfsame day, the grisly, cruel hangman, Death, which from his first coming in hath ever hoved aloof, and looked toward him, and ever lain in await on him, shall amid all his royalty, and all his main strength, neither kneel before him, nor make him any reverence, nor with any good manner desire him to come forth; but rigorously and fiercely gripe him by the very breast, and make all his

bones rattle, and so by long and divers sore torments, strike him stark dead." [1]

But, as a rule, in writing for himself or for other true Christians, More takes the thought of death more kindly.

It is remarkable in a man whose meditations constantly came back to thoughts of this kind, that his spirituality is never overweighted by fear; and here again we find the solution, not by any theoretical process, but by the humble confidence of a saint, of the antinomy that is such a stumbling-block to independent moralists. Neither the fear of hell nor the hope of heaven seemed to him incompatible with the loftiest sentiments. It was not St Teresa but a solid Englishman, a man of his times and the father of a family, who wrote this prayer:—

"Give me, good Lord, a longing to be with Thee, not for the avoiding of the calamities of this wretched world; nor so much for the avoiding of the pains of purgatory, nor of the pains of hell neither, nor so much for the attaining of the joys of heaven in respect of mine own commodity, as even for a very love to Thee." [2]

Words fail me to express the effect of this gift of the love of God and of souls in softening the lively candour of his style, the penetrating and humane compassion with which the future martyr tells o'er the wounds of his crucified Saviour.

"And give me, good Lord, an humble, lowly, quiet, peaceable, patient, charitable, kind, tender,

[1] *Dialogue of Comfort*, *English Works*, pp. 1243, 1244; B. ii. 72.
[2] *English Works*, p. 1418; B. ii. 96.

and filial mind"—every shade, in fact, of charity—"with all my works, and all my words, and all my thoughts, to have a taste of Thy holy blessed Spirit."[1]

Indeed, I would almost undertake to show by strict comparison that the *mellitissimus* friend of Erasmus[2] was a forerunner, both in tone and doctrine, of St Francis de Sales. In spite of its English accent, Philotheus would not have hesitated long to acknowledge as his own this passage on Scrupulosity:—

"Pusillanimity bringeth forth a very timorous daughter, a silly, wretched girl, and ever puling, that is called Scrupulosity, or a scrupulous conscience. This girl is a meetly good puzzle in a house, never idle, but ever occupied and busy; one, albeit she have a very gentle mistress, that loveth her well, and is content with that she doth, or if it be not all well (as all cannot be well always), content to pardon her as she doth other of her fellows, and so letteth her know that she will; yet can this peevish girl never cease whining and puling for fear lest her mistress be always angry with her, and that she shall shrewdly be shent. Were her mistress, ween you, like to be content with this condition? Nay, surely. I knew such one myself, whose mistress was a very wise woman, and (which thing is in women very rare) very mild and also meek, and liked very well such service as she did her in the house, but this continual discomfortable fashion of hers she so much misliked, that she

[1] B. ii. 95.

[2] B. i. 121, note.

would sometimes say: 'Eh! what aileth this girl? Surely if she did me ten times better service than she doth, yet with this fantastical fear of hers I would be loath to have her in my house.'"[1]

This chapter from the *Dialogue upon Tribulation* might stand quite naturally in the *Introduction to a Devout Life;* so too, among others, might that in which More explains how far it is permissible to lay aside the cross.

"I think in very deed tribulation so good and profitable, that I should haply doubt wherefore a man might labour or pray to be delivered of it, saving that God, which teacheth us the one, teacheth us also the other. And as He biddeth us take our pain patiently, and exhort our neighbours to do also the same; so biddeth He us also not to let to do our devoir to remove the pain from us both. And then when it is God that teacheth both, I shall not need to break my brain in devising wherefore He could bid us do both, the one seeming to resist the other. . . . If He send us the plague of pestilence, He will that we shall patiently take it, but yet will He that we let us blood, and lay plasters to draw it, and ripe it, and lame it, and get it away. . . . Now, can we not tell surely how much tribulation may mar it (*i.e.* the body), or peradventure hurt the soul also? . . . And as He will that we do for ourselves, so will He that we do for neighbours too; and that we shall in this world be each to other piteous, and not *sine affectione*. . . . St John saith, he that loveth not his neighbour whom he seeth, loveth God but a little

[1] *Dialogue of Comfort*, *English Works*, p. 1182; B. ii. 49.

whom he seeth not; so he that hath no pity on the pain that he seeth his neighbour feel afore him, pitieth little (whatsoever he say) the pain of his soul that he seeth not yet."[1]

At that, with its strong note of St Francis de Sales, let us pause. More's latest biographer, Mr W. H. Hutton, very justly recalls some of the great names in English religious literature, Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, and others, by whom Blessed Thomas More deserves a place. I have introduced the name of another writer, not with any idea of controversy, but simply for the exactness of the literary parallel. No one has more admiration than I for the melodious solemnity of the Anglican divines, the sombre and glowing faith of Bunyan, and those early sermons of Newman's, which mark an epoch in the inner life of all who have read them. And yet there is a note lacking in all these works, a note which we find on every page of More; a unique mixture of tenderness and reverence, of seriousness and freedom; the childlike spirit that no solemnity can check and no Puritanism cloud; the simple, smiling piety, the soul of youth of the religious England, at once sedate and serene, which was to pass with Sir Thomas More.

[1] *Dialogue of Comfort*, *English Works*, p. 1160; B. ii. 51-53.

# CHAPTER VII

## THE CONFLICT

I forgat not in this matter the counsel of Christ in the gospel, that ere I should begin to build this castle for the safeguard of mine own soul, I should sit and reckon what the charge would be. I counted, Marget, full surely many a restless night, while my wife slept, and weened I had slept too, what peril were possible for to fall to me, so far forth that I am sure there can come none above. And in devising, daughter, thereupon, I had a full heavy heart. But yet I thank our Lord for all that, I never thought to change, though the very uttermost should hap me that my fear ran upon. (Sir Thomas More: from a letter written in prison either by Margaret Roper, or by More in his daughter's name.)

THE present chapter is of all others essential to any attempt to represent the fine and delicate nature of Sir Thomas More in all its infinite shades. The martyr who showed himself so original in his attitude to death was certainly not less original during the course of the events which brought him by slow degrees to his tragic end. Bishop Fisher, as he went to execution, asked for his cloak: he did not wish to catch cold on the way. And so with More on that march to martyrdom which lasted for years. He measured every step he took, and counted them. Now and then he stopped and looked behind him, not in order to shun suffering, but to follow the inflexible and subtle delicacy of a conscience that desired at one and the same time to

answer the first call of duty and reach the extremest point of legitimate concession. He was without illusion and equally without fear. He knew whither he was being led; and that death, long probable, finally certain, he accepted. But at the same time he was free from all passion, all haste. As politician, he set every wheel in motion to defer the fatal issue; as advocate, he brought all his genius to bear on his own defence, just as he had been used to do for his clients. He knew no weak moments, either in wit or will; our admiration follows him step by step without a throb of anguish; and yet, proud and independent in his obedience, he was never so submissive, so conciliating, as in his resistance. To find an analogous example of generosity in prudence, we must go, perhaps, to the conversion of Newman. In both men we find the same deliberation, the same constant refusal to hurry forward, the same clear understanding of the complexity of the problems, and the same fear of influencing others with the contagion of a sacrifice which God alone has the right to demand. That is what makes these two rare souls stand out equally from the common men, who seldom move slowly without a suspicion of weakness and fear. In place of the broad, straight road along which we have come to imagine the heroes of duty marching with light heart, we find these two in sinuous paths, which each is compelled to clear for himself, and where two men cannot walk abreast. It were folly to ask which is the better way, the high road or the path: every way is good that leads to martyrdom. The essential thing is

surrender to the inspirations of grace. We may be sure in advance of what the story of Sir Thomas More will show us anew, that this grace, in its divine multiplicity, is marvellously accommodated to the originality of each soul.

## II

Freeman used to be fond of quoting the discreet formula employed by a certain Oxford professor to sum up the second half of the reign of Henry VIII.: "The later years of this great monarch were clouded by domestic troubles."[1] That professor deserved a bishopric. We may thank God that contemporary Anglicanism has ceased to employ such euphemisms. There is no possibility, nowadays especially, of misreading the simple and lucid story. Henry wanted to be rid of his wife. Anne Boleyn was burning to put the crown on her pretty head. The Pope, urgently solicited, refused to sanction the double caprice; the King replied by a proclamation of his own supremacy in religious matters and an edict commanding the clergy to recognise that the Bishop of Rome had no jurisdiction outside his own diocese —and it was all over for centuries with the unity of the Christian world.[2]

[1] Bryce, *Studies in Contemporary Biography*, p. 271, note.

[2] A writer who attempted to maintain that the history of the first stages of the Reformation in England was not so simple, was answered decisively by Mr Gairdner, a portion of whose reply I may be permitted to quote:—"In Mr Hutton's view the divorce of Henry VIII. had nothing essentially to do with the Reformation! When

The delightful part of this edifying story is that that very same King, during his controversy with the Lutherans, had loudly affirmed the universality of the pontifical jurisdiction. There was a certain member of the King's theological council who asked him then to moderate the vigour of his Ultramontane pronouncements, the same member who was soon to be the first to refuse his submission to Henry's schismatic caprices. A few months before his martyrdom, More related the incident with his usual frankness.

"At the first reading whereof (*i.e.* the passage in the King's book which concerned the primacy of the Pope) I moved the King's Highness either to leave out that point or else to touch it more slenderly, for doubt of such things as after might hap to fall in question between his Highness and some Pope."

His advice sprang from political considerations;

a gentleman of Mr Hutton's attainments is able seriously to tell us this, I think it is really time to ask people to put two and two together and say whether they find the sum can be anything whatever but four. It may be disagreeable to trace the Reformation to such a very ignoble origin; but facts, as the Scottish poet says, are fellows that you can't coerce." The whole letter should be read. It appeared in the *Guardian* of March 1, 1899, and is reprinted, with another letter of Mr Gairdner's on the same subject, in the *Tablet* of March 4, 1899. I am far from questioning the necessity of a reform, and I even think that the author of *The Eve of the Reformation* might have conceded a little more on this point. But schism is neither the sole nor the best path to reform. It would, moreover, be as puerile as unjust to see nothing in the history of Anglicanism but this sad story of its conception, and forget all that Manning himself called "The workings of the Holy Ghost in the Church of England."

but at the moment More had stronger reasons for maintaining a discreet reserve on this point.

"Truth it is . . . I was myself sometime not of the mind that the primacy of that See should be begun by the institution by God."

The King's book gave him occasion to study the question more closely, and after ten years' research into the Fathers and the Councils he had reached the conclusion that "his conscience were . . . in right great peril, if I should follow the other side, and deny the primacy to be provided by God." But it appears that though this truth was fixed in his mind thenceforth, More had never held it for an article of faith. The great schism had unsettled all his ideas on the subject, and the young critic had proposed queries that were still unanswered. "The (spiritual) monarchy of the Pope," said Erasmus, "I have never doubted, but I put out the question somewhere whether the monarchy was either claimed or acknowledged in the time of Jerome." Tunstall, who was highly esteemed by More for his virtue and knowledge, openly proposed the theories of modern Anglicanism. Fisher, no doubt, was already a staunch Roman, but it was quite natural that a theologian by circumstance, and self-taught, like More, should have taken some time to make up his mind between the two schools, and that, once his choice was made, and made rightly, he should hesitate to pronounce on the point too insistently. Moreover, he did not carry all the consequences of the theological thesis to their practical conclusion.

"And verily," he wrote, "since the King's Highness hath . . . appealed to the General Council from the Pope . . . methinketh . . . it could be no furtherance there unto His Grace's cause if his Highness should . . . seem to derogate and deny, not only the primacy of the See Apostolic, but also the authority of the General Councils too. . . . For in the next General Council it may well happen, that this Pope may be deposed and another substituted in his room, with whom the King's Highness may be very well content. For albeit that I have for my own part such opinion of the Pope's primacy as I have showed you, yet never thought I the Pope above the General Council, nor never have I in any book of mine, put forth among the King's subjects in our vulgar tongue, advanced greatly the Pope's authority. For albeit that a man may peradventure so find therein that, after the common manner of all Christian realms, I speak of him as primate, yet never do I stick thereon with reasoning and proving of that point. And in my book against the Masker I wrote not, I wot well, five lines, and yet of no more but only St Peter himself, from whose person many take not the primacy, even of those that grant it none of his successors. But whereas I had written thereof at length in my Confutation before, and for the proof thereof had compiled together all that I could find therefor, at such time as I little looked that there should fall between the King's Highness and the Pope, such a breach as is fallen since; when I after that saw the thing likely to draw towards such displeasure between them I

suppressed it utterly, and never put word thereof in my book."[1]

These statements, written on the eve of More's trial, are of the utmost importance, not only because they show a reserve characteristic of a theologian and worthy of Newman himself, but mainly because they give a precise definition of the cause for which this great man was willing to die. When, a few months later, he gave his life as the price of his refusal to question the sovereignty of the Pope, he did so, not because he regarded it as a dogma of faith imposed upon all, but solely because he held it to be true. He never broaches the question for others; he makes no attempt to gain their adhesion, not even his own daughter's, to what he holds to be a free opinion; it is merely this, that his own researches having convinced him personally of the primacy of the Roman pontiff, he recognises no right to speak on the matter otherwise than as he thinks. The close of this long letter to Cromwell leaves no doubt that this was Sir Thomas More's attitude; and to transcribe it in all its heroic simplicity, is to gain, I think, the right to remind the world once more that our martyrs are also the witnesses and the champions of "liberty of thought."

"Nor yet in any other thing else, never was there, nor never there shall be any further fault found in

[1] All the extracts quoted above on the primacy are taken from the long letter More wrote to Cromwell in his defence. The letter may be found in the *English Works* (pp. 1424 *et seq.*), but is better consulted in the *Life* by Father Bridgett, who has collated it with the original MS. The remarks accompanying the extracts are a faithful *résumé* of Father Bridgett, B. i. pp. 343-348.

me, than that I cannot in everything think the same way that some other men of more wisdom and deeper learning do; nor can find in mine heart otherwise to say than as mine own conscience giveth me." [1]

When, therefore, we find him defending himself and rebutting one by one the charges under which his enemies were trying to crush him, we must not conclude that he is merely endeavouring to escape death, but that, simply from a sense of justice, a scruple of loyalty, and a supreme respect for the finest shades of truth, he wishes to define exactly the real cause of his martyrdom: "I cannot in everything think the same way that some other men . . . nor can find in mine heart otherwise to say than as mine own conscience giveth me."

## III

Henry VIII., then, had neglected the advice of his counsellor, and published his apology for the papal supremacy without revision. Meanwhile he was attacked by other doubts, which set the official casuists to work. Had not the Pope exceeded his powers in authorising the king's marriage with Catherine, the widow of Henry VII.'s eldest son? It was not till September 1527 that the king acquainted More with the belated tremors of his conscience. Straight to his face one day when they were both walking in the gallery at Hampton Court,

[1] *English Works*, p. 1428.

his Highness informed him that the marriage was so contrary to divine law "that it could in nowise by the church be dispensable." There was a Bible in the room. Henry opened it. He read aloud the specific texts from *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*, and asked if it were possible, after that, not to recognise that the divorce was inevitable. More bore the shock with no excess of emotion. His own eyes, or at any rate the gossip of the Court, had revealed to him the more pressing dangers that threatened the king's soul, and had it not been for the thought of the unhappy queen, he would have found the first act of the drama amusing enough. His calm was not taken in ill part, and he was made to attend learned controversies at which the question was discussed by a great concourse of theologians. The trial of the case was opened at the Court of Rome. More obeyed the king by acquainting himself with what was argued on both sides; and then, finding it impossible to share the opinions of the Court theologians, he declined to hear the controversy mentioned.

"Settling my mind in quiet," he wrote, "to *serve his Grace in other things*, I would not so much as look nor let lie by me any book of the tother part . . . nor never gave ear to the Pope's proceeding in the matter."[1]

[1] *English Works*, p. 1426. His attitude relieves me of the need of studying the very difficult question of the divorce in itself. Whatever Henry VIII.'s intentions may have been, the canonical problem itself was very complicated, and it is known that the legate Campeggio long inclined towards a solution agreeing with the king's wishes.

Meanwhile Wolsey had fallen from power, found guilty of not carrying the Pope's assent by storm. It really looks as if the appointment of More to succeed him was a last attempt on Henry's part to win over to the divorce the man who was then the most considerable person in England. Henry did not suspect, even after fifteen years of intimacy, the reserves of indomitable firmness hidden beneath that facile, kindly, and liberal nature.[1] He was careful not to reveal to his new Chancellor the plans of vengeance which his pride, wounded by the Pope's decision, was already concocting; he even gave him an assurance that the whole matter should remain where it was. Both parties were soon to be better acquainted with each other, and, if More had some few moments of hope, they were brief. Moreover, his new situation showed him no motive for abandoning his former tactics. So long as he was not required to act for himself or speak in his own name, he pursued his way outside the detestable intrigue, neither saying nor doing anything that could be construed into approval of the king's conduct. The desertion of Catherine and the filling of her place by Anne Boleyn were matters of the king's conscience, and More, having once clearly stated his opinion, thought that for the moment he need only protest by his silence. A citizen of a modern state who found himself in similar circumstances, would have the right to "submit his resignation." The right was not so clear in the monarchy of those days; and as to the duty, whatever may be the abstract

[1] Dixon, *History of the Church of England*, i. pp. 9, 10.

solution of the very difficult case, Sir Thomas More did what he thought best. We may trust him for that.

The situation, moreover, was consistently equivocal. Officially the only question remained the resolution of the king's scruples. More himself, a few months after his appointment, was called upon to remind the public that this was the comedy still on the stage. The Chancellor of England brings the royal commissions to Parliament; and it was in the capacity of the simple bearer of a message that he opened the session of March 15, 1531. The Imperial ambassador, Chapuys, in a letter to Charles V., says that "the Chancellor declared to the lords in Parliament, by command of the king, that there were some who had said that the king was pursuing the divorce out of love for some lady, and not out of scruples of conscience, and that this was not true. Hereupon some asked the Chancellor for his opinion; on which he said that he had many times already declared it to the king, and said no more. The Chancellor then went down to the Commons, and made the same declaration on the part of the king."[1]

Some days before, on February 11, 1531, the clergy had been ordered to recognise the king as the "Supreme Head of the Anglican Church."

Father Bridgett has firmly established the fact that this ambiguous title might still be compatible with the supremacy of the Holy See. Moreover, the dying independence of the bishops had accom-

[1] *Letters and Papers*, v. 171; B. i. 233, 234.

panied the decree by an amendment which reduced it to a cipher.[1] The measure was none the less grave, and, as it were, a rough sketch of schism. "The Chancellor is so mortified at it," writes Chapuys, "that he is anxious above all things to resign his office."[2] "It is clear from this," adds Father Bridgett, "that his voice had ceased to have any weight in the royal councils; yet either his name gave prestige to the government, or the King was still in hopes of gaining him to his side, or there was no pretext for his deposition." So false a situation could not hold for long.

In May 1532, when the King wished to take a step forward and forbid the clergy to prosecute heretics or to hold any meeting whatsoever without his express permission, More and some of the bishops offered an energetic resistance to the new legal project. "The king is very angry," writes Chapuys, "especially with the Chancellor and the Bishop of Winchester, and is determined to carry the matter."[3] Three days later, on May 16, 1532, More finally induced the king to accept the reasons of health and others which rendered him unfit to retain his office. Henry had tried him and found him wanting; there was nothing to be gained from him, and the king consented, without anger, to dispense with his services.

It meant poverty, almost want; but any privation would have seemed a gain after the anguish of those

[1] "So far as the law of Christ allows."
[2] *Letters and Papers*, v. 112; B. i. 234.
[3] *Ibid.*, v. 1013; B. i. 235.

terrible years. More's first thought on being compelled to put down all unnecessary expenses was to find situations for the men of his suite. When all were well provided for, he parted with his fool, whom he passed on to the Lord Mayor, and gave his successor the eight rowers and the great barge which had so often taken him from Chelsea to Westminster.

Then he called all his family together, and addressed them, says his son-in-law, as follows:—

"I have been brought up at Oxford, at an inn of the Chancery, at Lincoln's Inn, and also in the King's Court, and so forth from the lowest degree to the highest, and yet have I in yearly revenues at this present left me little above a hundred pounds by the year. So that now we must hereafter, if we like to live together, be contented to become contributaries together. But by my counsel it shall not be best for us to fall to the lowest fare first; we will not, therefore, descend to Oxford fare, nor to the fare of New Inn, but we will begin with Lincoln's Inn diet, where many right worshipful and of good years do live full well, which, if we find not ourselves the first year able to maintain, then we will the next year go one step down to New Inn fare, wherewith many an honest man is well contented. If that exceed our ability too, then will we, the next year after, descend to Oxford fare, where many grave, learned, and ancient fathers be continually conversant. Which, if our ability stretch not to maintain neither, then may we yet, with bags and wallets, go a-begging together, and hoping that for

pity some good folk will give us their charity, at every man's door to sing *Salve Regina*, and so still keep company and be merry together, like the poor students at Oxford." [1]

"Be merry together;" it was long since More had used that pleasant word, which he had always been fond of. We find it again now that he is on the downward slope. He had not time, alas! to shoulder his wallet again like the "poor students at Oxford," but Harpsfield says that the whole house had to practise the strictest economy. "He was compelled for the lack of other fuel, every night before he went to bed, to cause a great burden of fern to be brought into his own chamber, and with the blaze thereof to warm himself, his wife and his children, and so without any other fires to go to their beds." [2]

## IV

Events, meanwhile, were moving rapidly. On January 25, 1533, the king was secretly married to his favourite. In March, as soon as the bulls had arrived, and with the forced assent of the assembled clergy, Archbishop Cranmer summoned Henry before his tribunal, and declared his union with Catherine null and void. The consciences of these pharisees on the legitimacy of Henry's marriage with Anne Boleyn were then reassured by a brief

[1] Roper, and Harpsfield (p. 294) for the last six words.
[2] B. i. 243, note.

inquiry, and June 1 was fixed for the coronation of the queen. Till then More's departure had been cloaked under specious appearances. The king had made him flattering speeches, and informed him officially how much he regretted that the Chancellor's illness prevented him from continuing his valued services. Henry was reckoning, moreover, on his friend's presence at the coronation. By the king's orders three bishops wrote to More begging him to go with them to the celebration. The messenger also brought a fairly large sum of money, the price of the robes which the ex-Chancellor would have to order for the occasion. More kept the money and stayed at home. Some days later, meeting the bishops, he said to them: "My lords, in the letters which you lately sent me, you required two things of me: the one, sith I was so well content to grant you, the other therefore I thought I might be the bolder to deny you." The money, he added, he had accepted with gratitude and without a scruple, since the bishops were rich and he poor. As to their other request, he had been unable to accede to it, and he thereupon told them a story, the moral of which was that the bishops, by risking their honour, would not escape the danger that threatened their heads. He himself might well lose his life, but his honour he would preserve.

It should be noticed that in refusing the invitation More did not exactly refuse to acknowledge the new queen. He had said from the first that this matter was outside his province, and that he would have no dealings with it. Cranmer having pronounced judg-

ment on the case, he had no thought of protesting against his decision.[1] But he was equally unwilling to pay court to a woman he distrusted, and publicly deny the other queen, who in happier days had been kind to him, and to whom there was no reason against his remaining faithful. Here again we find the same admixture of submission and independence. His earliest editors either did not know or did not dare to publish a passage of his writings which leaves no doubt whatever of his attitude towards Anne Boleyn.

"So am I he that among other his Grace's faithful subjects, his Highness being *in possession of his marriage* and this noble woman really anointed Queen, neither murmur at it nor dispute upon it, nor never did, nor will, but without any other meddling of the matter among his other faithful subjects, faithfully pray to God for his Grace *and hers* both long to live and well, and their noble issue too."[2]

With More, the English people remained faithful to Catherine of Aragon. The day of the coronation was as silent as a funeral, and not a soul was to be seen on the route taken by the usurping queen. The king wished to make an example which should quicken enthusiasm. At the convent of St Sepulchre at Canterbury there was a poor woman with a great reputation for holiness. Her visions and prophecies

[1] The Pope's decision in favour of Catherine was not given till a year later; it is dated March 23, 1534.

[2] *Letters and Papers*, vii., Doc. 289, pp. 123, 124. The letter is dated March 5, a few days before the decision of Rome.

had an extraordinary renown, and she was imprudent enough, when questioned about the divorce, to say that God disapproved of the king's conduct. She was hanged at Tyburn, with six of her partisans, on April 20, 1534. It had been hoped that the minute inquiry conducted into her case would reveal a nobler victim. In a paper of January 1534, on which Cromwell made notes of resolutions he was afraid of forgetting, we find, among other measures concerning the nun of Canterbury and her accomplices, this sinister memorandum: "Eftsoons to remember Master More to the King."[1] More had, in fact, had one or two conversations with the prophetess, and this was considered a good occasion to be rid of him. But his habitual caution had already sprung the trap. The incident is characteristic. As soon as she was alone with him, the "holy maid," after a few words of edification, had shown signs of embarking on political topics: More had silenced her. More than that, on his return home, foreseeing that others, less discreet than himself, might run the risk of compromising the poor woman, he had written her an affectionate and delicately worded letter, imploring her to confine her communications to the things of the kingdom of God.[2] The rough draft of the letter was still in his possession; More sent it to Cromwell, who was convinced on inquiry[3] of its

[1] B. i. 322.

[2] When he wrote this letter, More still held Elizabeth Barton in high esteem. He changed his opinion later, when she had avowed herself an impostor. The avowal was wrung from her by torture, and there is no knowing what importance should be attached to it.

[3] B. i. 333, 334.

authenticity, and was careful not to produce it at the trial.

More wrote to Henry himself, at the same time as to Cromwell (March 5, 1534). It is a touching letter, which shows that what his noble and true heart suffered most from was the knowledge that his king suspected him of treason.

"It may like your Highness to call to your gracious remembrance that at such time as of that great weighty room and office of your Chancellor . . . ye were so good as . . . to discharge and disburden me . . . it pleased your Highness further to say unto me, that for the service which before I had done you . . . in any suit that I should after have to your Grace, that either should concern mine honour (that word it liked your Highness to use unto me), or that should pertain unto my profit, I should find your Highness good and gracious lord to me. So is it now, gracious Sovereign, that worldly honour is the thing whereof I have resigned both the possession and the desire, in the resignation of your most honourable office; and worldly profit I trust experience proveth, and daily more and more shall prove, that I never was very greedy thereon. But now is my most humble suit unto your excellent Highness . . . that . . . no sinister information move your noble Grace to have any more distrust of my truth and devotion toward you than I have or shall during my life give the cause. . . . I only beseech your Majesty . . . consider and weigh the matter . . . and that if, in your so doing, your own virtuous mind shall give you that . . . I be a wretch of such

a monstrous ingratitude . . . then desire I no further favour at your gracious hand than the loss of all that ever I may ever lose, goods, lands, liberty, and my life withal, whereof the keeping of any part unto myself could never do me pennyworth of pleasure. But only should my comfort be, that after my short life and your long . . . I should once meet your Grace and be merry again with you in heaven, where, among mine other pleasures, this should yet be one, that your Grace should surely see there then that, howsoever you take me, I am your true bedesman now, and ever have been, and will be till I die, howsoever your pleasure be to do by me." [1]

Any one but Henry VIII. would at least have granted a truce to such humble grandeur, such transparent honesty; but the unhappy king was possibly no longer capable of comprehending such accents. He was determined to combine the cases of the prophetess and of Sir Thomas More, and to arraign More on a charge of high treason. The ex-Chancellor had demanded to plead his cause before the Upper Chamber, and the lords, though not overflowing with courage, had signed a petition praying that the accused might be brought before them. But they were not yet sufficiently to be depended on. The King decided that More should be heard before a commission of four members of the Privy Council, Cranmer, Audley, the Duke of Norfolk, and Thomas Cromwell. Such men as these could be spoken to without ambiguity, and Henry explained to them that what he expected of them

[1] Ellis, *Letters*, ii. p. 47; *Letters and Papers*, vii. 288.

was not a conviction, which he did not want, but a final assault on More's obstinacy. They acted accordingly, promised, threatened, talked of ingratitude; finally, for the sake of peace and quietness, dismissed the accused.

"Then," writes Roper, "took Sir Thomas More his boat towards his house at Chelsea, wherein by the way he was very merry, and for that I was nothing sorry, hoping that he had gotten himself discharged out of the Parliament bill. When he was landed and come home, then walked we twain alone in his garden together; when I, desirous to know how he had sped, said: 'I trust, sir, that all is well because that you be so merry.' 'It is so indeed, son Roper, I thank God,' quoth he. 'Are you then put out of the Parliament bill?' quoth I. 'By my troth, son Roper,' quoth he, 'I never remembered it!' 'Never remembered it!' said I, 'a case that toucheth yourself so near, and us all for your sake! I am sorry to hear it, for I verily trusted, when I saw you so merry, that all had been well.' Then said he: 'Wilt thou know, son Roper, why I was so merry?' 'That would I gladly, sir,' quoth I. 'In good faith I rejoiced, son,' said he, 'that I had given the devil a foul fall, and that with those lords I had gone so far as without great shame I would never go back again.' At which words I waxed very sad; for though himself liked it well, yet liked it we but little."

The King was furious at the result of the conference, and commanded the bill to be brought on. The Chancellor and the rest fell on their knees

to implore him not to adopt this procedure. The innocence of More's relations with the nun of Canterbury was so evident that it would be mere folly to rely on such grounds. The king, very much against his will, allowed himself to be convinced. "On the morrow after," Roper continues, "Master Cromwell meeting me in the Parliament house, willed me to tell my father that he was put out of the Parliament bill. But because I had appointed to dine that day in London, I sent the message by my servant to my wife to Chelsea. Whereof when she informed her father, 'In faith, Meg,' quoth he, '*Quod differtur non aufertur*.' After this, as the Duke of Norfolk and Sir Thomas More chanced to fall in familiar talk together, the Duke said unto him: 'By the Mass, Master More, it is perilous striving with princes, therefore I would wish you somewhat to incline to the King's pleasure. For by God's body, Master More, *Indignatio principis mors est*.' 'Is that all, my lord?' quoth he; 'then in good faith the difference between your Grace and me is but this, that *I shall die to-day and you to-morrow*.'"

## V

That same month of March 1534, Parliament passed an Act confirming the marriage of Henry and Anne Boleyn, and guaranteeing her children the right of succession to the crown. It was made high treason to oppose the Act; and to obviate any reservations, every subject in the kingdom was compelled

to take an oath before the king himself or his delegates to observe the new law in its entirety. The form of the oath, which was drawn up by the commission, was not confined to acknowledging the rights of Anne Boleyn and all children to be born of her; it was aggravated by a preamble in which the authority of the Pope was formally rejected.

The people obeyed in a body. The execution of the "holy maid" did not go for nothing in overcoming their repugnance; and who was likely to be a better judge of this case of conscience than the Archbishop of Canterbury, who had been appointed to receive their submission? Then, too, a prudent reservation came to soothe the conscience, if need were; some people took the oath "so far as it be not contrary to the law of God." It was in that sense, no doubt, that More's own favourite daughter, Margaret Roper, obeyed the wishes of Parliament. But such little evasions, permissible or pardonable in the common run, were unworthy of a Fisher or a Thomas More. For them, the limits of legitimate concession had now been passed.

On Low Sunday, April 12, More came to London to hear a sermon at St Paul's, and went on to see John Clements. His presence was noticed, and he was quickly accosted by an officer of the Court, who summoned him to appear the next day at Lambeth before the royal commissioners, to take the new oath.

"Then Sir Thomas More," says Roper, "as his accustomed manner was always ere he entered into any matter of importance—as when he was first

chosen of the King's privy council, when he was sent ambassador, appointed Speaker of the Parliament, made Lord Chancellor, or when he took any like weighty matter upon him—to go to church and be confessed, to hear Mass, and be houseled, so did he likewise in the morning early the selfsame day that he was summoned to appear before the lords at Lambeth. And whereas he evermore used before, at his departure from his wife and children, whom he tenderly loved, to have them bring him to his boat, and then to kiss them, and bid them all farewell, then would he suffer none of them forth of the gate to follow him, but pulled the wicket after him, and shut them all from him, and with a heavy heart, as by his countenance it appeared, with me and our four servants then took boat towards Lambeth. Wherein sitting still sadly a while, at the last he rounded me in the ear and said: 'Son Roper, I thank our Lord the field is won.' What he meant thereby I wist not, yet loath to seem ignorant, I answered: 'Sir, I am very glad thereof.' But, as I conjectured afterwards, it was for that the love he had to God wrought in him so effectually, that it conquered all his carnal affections utterly."

A few minutes later, More stood before his judges.

The history of the Church contains few more important pages. The scene is well known, the banks of the Thames at Lambeth and the palace of the Archbishops of Canterbury, the successors of Anselm and Thomas à Becket. On the opposite bank rose the marvellous church where slept the

dust of King Edward the Confessor. On those two sacred spots converge the recollections of centuries of faith, the martyr-roll of Iona and Bangor, the incomparable golden legend of the island that was indeed the isle of saints. All these ghosts were now to be exorcised. Behind the scenes, a little distance off, was King Henry directing the drama. Close by his side is a woman, and in a cradle a child of eight months, the future Queen Elizabeth. On the stage sit four factotums, Chancellor Audley, Thomas Cromwell, and two churchmen, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Abbot of Westminster. Before them come nobles and priests stepping gaily to deny the authority of the Bishop of Rome. No one has yet dared to refuse the oath; but at last there comes one who stands and faces the commissioners, Sir Thomas More. His is the Catholic conscience, neither strained nor brittle, but immovable. The deed that is being done in this hall is the schism of England, the England whose imperial destinies we know so weli to-day, and the schism is more disastrous to the Roman Church and more to be deplored than even the revolt of Luther. We only want the laughter and the jokes for the drama to resemble a scene from Shakespeare; and here they are to hand. Sir Thomas More himself has preserved the remembrance of the smallest details of the spectacle. From the little room where they bid him go to reflect a little further, his gaze fell over the garden.

"In that time saw I Master Doctor Latimer come

into the garden, and there walked he with divers other doctors and chaplains of my Lord of Canterbury, and very merry I saw him, for he laughed, and took one or twain about the neck so handsomely, that if they had been women, I would have weened he had been waxen wanton. . . . I heard also that Master Vicar of Croydon, and all the remnant of the priests of London that were sent for, were sworn; and that they had such favour at the council's hand, that they were not lingered, nor made to dance any long attendance to their travail and cost, as suitors were sometimes wont to be, but were sped apace to their great comfort; so far forth that Master Vicar of Croydon, either for gladness or for dryness, or else that it might be seen, *Quod ille notus erat pontifici*, went to my Lord's buttery bar, and called for drink, and drank *valde familiariter*."

More's interrogation was pressed hard; the former advocate had lost none of his resource, but he had never had to do with such cunning opponents. He all but lost his footing, as he himself relates.

"My Lord of Canterbury, taking hold upon that that I had said, that I condemned not the consciences of them that sware, said unto me that it appeared well that I did not take it for a very sure thing and a certain, that I might not lawfully swear it, but rather as a thing uncertain and doubtful. But then (said my Lord) you know for a certainty, and a thing without doubt, that you be bounden to obey your sovereign lord your King. And therefore are you bounden to leave off the doubt of your unsure conscience in refusing the oath, and take the sure

way of obeying your prince, and swear it. Now all was it so, that in mine own mind me thought myself not concluded, yet this argument seemed me suddenly so subtle, and namely with such authority coming out of so noble a prelate's mouth, that I could again answer nothing thereto, but only that I thought myself I might not well do so, because that in my conscience this was one of the cases in which I was bounden that I should not obey my prince, sith that whatsoever other folk thought in the matter (whose conscience or learning I would not condemn nor take upon me to judge), yet in my conscience the truth seemed on the tother side."

Thereupon the Abbot of Westminster appealed to his modesty, observing that, since the great council of the realm had determined contrary to him, he ought not to persist in following his own opinion. More replied instantly that on the side of his conscience against the council of the realm he had a greater council still, "the general council of Christendom." Then Thomas Cromwell, who had no mind to be like the judges of the first martyrs, far from crying out with a loud voice at the scandal, "sware a great oath that he had sooner that his only son . . . had lost his head than that I should have refused the oath"; for what would the king think, and what would he do?

"To which I said that . . . whatsoever should mishap me, it lay not in my power to help it without the peril of my soul."[1]

[1] The whole story of the scene is given in one of More's letters to his daughter Margaret; *cf.* B. i. 353-357.

No dialectic in the world could prevail over such a man. The judges recognised that at last, and abandoned a useless discussion. The poor souls deserve our pity, for they were in a worse case than their victim. The man before the tribunal was an old friend. They had met him often in other circumstances, and neither the summit of honour nor the worst extremities of human life could make the smallest change in his attractive grace, his wit, or his affectionate good-nature. As Erasmus says, he was one of those whom one could not help loving, and now that he showed so much simple courage under his sweet and prepossessing exterior, his charm must have been stronger than ever. We may safely say for them and for Sir Thomas More, that every one of them, including even Cromwell, would have been only too glad to find some way out of the difficulty, and it was not policy alone that suggested the thousand means of saving him which they united in trying to adopt.

There was one still possible. More had expressly stated that the preamble of the oath was all that offended his conscience. He made no difficulty about acknowledging the rights of the queen and the accession to the throne of the children born of the marriage. But he could not suffer the attack aimed in the preamble at the authority of the Bishop of Rome.[1] Cranmer, the subtle and con-

[1] The Pope had declared the validity of the marriage of Henry and Catherine ; and it certainly seems, therefore, that, with or without the preamble, the oath was scarcely compatible with the

ciliating, asked Cromwell, therefore, to put before the king a new form of oath, which "Master More" might sign without further scruple. "And, peradventure, it should be a good quietation to many other within this realm, if such men (*i.e.* as the Bishop of Rochester and More) should say that the succession comprised within the said Act is good and according to God's laws." [1]

But it was too late. The self-love of the tyrant, once held in check by the honesty of these two, was clamouring for vengeance, and Henry refused to grant his counsellors' request.

When the inquiry was over and the sentence given, More had been handed over for a few days to the Abbot of Westminster's guard. On April 17, having again refused to subscribe to the oath, he was taken to the Tower.

On his way to prison, "wearing, as he commonly did, a chain of gold about his neck, Sir Richard Southwell, that had the charge of his conveyance thither, advised him to send home his chain to his wife or to some of his children. 'Nay, sir,' quoth he, 'that I will not: for if I were taken in the field by my enemies I would they should somewhat fare the better for me.' At whose landing Master Lieutenant was ready at the Tower gate to receive him, when

rights of the Holy See. The attack, however, was less explicit and less direct; and in any case it is clear that neither More nor Fisher thought of this consequence.

[1] B. i. 359.

the porter demanded of him his upper garment. 'Master porter,' quoth he, 'here it is,' and took off his cap and delivered it to him, saying, 'I am very sorry it is no better for thee.'"[1]

[1] Roper.

# CHAPTER VIII

## THE MARTYRDOM

Surely, Meg, a fainter heart than thy frail father hath thou canst not have. . . . And verily, my dear daughter, in this is my great comfort, that albeit I am almost afraid of a fillip, yet in all the agonies that I have had, I thank the mighty mercy of God, I never in my mind intended to consent to do anything against my conscience.—*English Works*, p. 1446.

"A FAINTER heart:" the phrase, I think, may be taken literally. More had not the soldier's temperament, in which a certain initial strength reinforced by training diminishes the natural cowardice of the nervous system and the horror of the imagination for all physical suffering. With more serenity, perhaps, than Erasmus, he had all his friend's somewhat timid sensitiveness; and the lives of both, easy and peaceful for the times they lived in, had left intact the delicate tenderness of their natures.[1]

Moreover, the hair-shirt which More, the more ardent of the two, considered necessary to the

[1] It may be remembered that Erasmus, when at Venice, could not stand the very Italian and summary *régime* of his friends the Aldi, with whom he was living. More's chest, especially towards the close of his life, caused his family some anxiety, and both were threatened with the stone, the dreadful penalty exacted by the science of those days.

resistance of common temptations, had not made him one of the heroes who go joyfully to torture; and far from pretending to make light of the punishment that awaited him, he feebly confessed his terror, and tried to keep his mind from dwelling to no purpose on that aspect, and to repose with childlike confidence on the store of courage that heaven would send him when the moment came.

As to his imprisonment, strict as it was, he had no trouble in making the best of it. Studious and prayerful by nature, he had preserved out of his old inclination towards the life of the cloister a sort of home-sickness for solitude, and the disturbances of his later years had prepared him to look on rest as a gift from heaven. To him, therefore, the Tower was a monastery, and his cell the cell of a monk. And no monk ever adapted himself more obediently to the monotony of his rule. The *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, which was written during his last fourteen months, is the most reposeful, the most smiling of all his books; and if he had been the only one to suffer, the condemned prisoner would have thought himself blessed with all the happiness that his unexacting philosophy looked to find in this world.

"I believe, Megg," he said to his daughter, "that they that have put me here ween they have done me a high displeasure, but I assure thee on my faith, mine own good daughter, if it had not been for my wife and ye that be my children . . . I would not have failed long ere this to have closed myself in as strait a room, and straiter too. But since I am come

hither without mine own desert, I trust that God of His goodness will discharge me of my care, and with His gracious help supply my lack among you. I find no cause, I thank God, Megg, to reckon myself in worse case here than in mine own house, for me thinketh God maketh me a wanton, and setteth me on His lap and dandleth me." [1]

But at Chelsea, the grief of his family was inexpressible. He had long prepared them, however, for the trial, and like a too learned teacher who fails to perceive the moment at which the affection of his pupils follows him while their intelligence is left behind, he believed in his simple heart that they understood his meaning when he spoke with tranquil conviction of the nothingness of life. And now he had to begin all over again.

Lady More, a woman of middle age and very ordinary mind, was the most difficult to convince. She was unselfish enough to deny herself everything in order to provide as well as she could for the maintenance of the prisoner; but she did not even try to see the sense of her husband's strange caprice. Why could he not do like everybody else, and follow the example of a number of excellent people of their acquaintance? He had had many a crotchet in his life before, but this was going beyond the bounds.

"'What the good-yere, Master More,'" said she at their first meeting—Roper tells the story, and his simple narrative seems to convey the very accents of the good lady—"'I marvel that you that have been always hitherto taken for so wise a man will now so

[1] Roper; *cf.* B. i. 367.

play the fool to lie here in this close filthy prison, and be content thus to be shut up among mice and rats, when you might be abroad at your liberty, and with the favour and good-will both of the King and his council if you would but do as all the bishops and best learned of this realm have done. And seeing you have at Chelsea a right fair house, your library, your gallery, your garden, your orchard, and all other necessaries so handsome about you, when you might in the company of me your wife, your children, and household, be merry, I muse what a God's name you mean here still thus fondly to tarry.' After he had a while quietly heard her, with a cheerful countenance he said unto her: 'I pray thee, good Mistress Alice, tell me one thing!' 'What is that?' quoth she. 'Is not this house,' quoth he, 'as nigh heaven as mine own?' To whom she, after her accustomed homely fashion, not liking such talk, answered: 'Tylle valle, Tylle valle!' 'How say you, Mistress Alice, is it not so?' '*Bone Deus*, *bone Deus*, man, will this gear never be left?' quoth she."

A passage in the *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* shows her again, examining the cell, inspecting on the floor and along the walls the straw mats which More had sent for to keep him from the cold, groaning as she looked at the massive bolts, and crying that for her part she could never breathe at night with such doors shut upon her.[1] Indeed we know not whether to laugh or cry at the spectacle of these two, so near and yet so far; she treating him

[1] *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, Book iii., cap. xx.; *English Works*, p. 1247.

like a fractious child of whose prattling no one takes any notice, and he cutting short his useless replies and waiting patiently till she shall have finished scolding him.

## II

But certain more touching visits are eternally bound up in the memory with the story of these long months in prison. To tell the truth, it takes a Plato to write at the dictation of a just man on the point of death, and all we have is the long and heavy letter in which Margaret Roper describes her last interview with her father. But such as it is, the letter is inestimably precious, and I regret that I cannot transcribe it in full. Two or three times Margaret Roper had obtained leave to visit her father. It was hoped in high quarters that the final intervention of his favourite child might possibly succeed at last in overcoming the prisoner's obstinacy. More's dear "Meg" was too like himself, and had been too long the companion of his constant thoughts not to feel in her heart of hearts that her father was right and the rest of the world wrong. But she was possessed by a desire to save him at any cost, and she tried to shut her eyes to the truth. Obviously she could hit on no new arguments. Cleverer minds than hers had exhausted every means of persuasion. But she summed up in her own person, if I may so express it, in a most appealing manner, everything that could induce More to cling, or rather to resign himself, to

life. There lies the mournful beauty of this meeting. We know beforehand that the appeal is hopeless, but we share her suffering and his at the thought of what both must have endured during the long talk which reminded them of all the past and cruelly tore away the veil of the future. Margaret Roper's letter has the advantage also of showing Thomas More as he was. Beneath his daughter's cumbrous phrases we can hear his own voice speaking, now, and most frequently, with the somewhat professorial copiousness that he was by no means averse from, and now with lively sallies of humour, slyness, and tenderness.

Margaret Roper's letter is addressed to her "sister," Alice Alington. "At my next being with him," she writes, "after your letter received, when I had a while talked with him, first of his diseases both in his breast as of old and his reins now, by reason of gravel and stone, and of the cramp also that divers nights grippeth him in his legs, and that I found by his words that they were not much increased, but continued after their manner that they did before, sometimes very sore and sometimes little grief, and that at that time I found him out of pain, and, as one in his case might, meekly well-minded, after our seven psalms and the litany said, to sit and talk and be merry, beginning first with other things, of the good comfort of my mother, and the good order of my brother, and all my sisters, disposing themselves every day more and more to set little by the world, and draw more and more to God, and that his household, his neighbours, and other

good friends abroad, diligently remembered him in their prayers. . . ."[1]

These preliminaries over, she plunged straight into the object of her visit, reminding More that he might well follow the example of many "great, wise, and well-learned men." Then, drawing from her pocket a paper, she went on: "I have received a letter of late from my sister *Alington*, by which I see well, that if ye change not your mind, you are likely to lose all those friends that are able to do you any good. . . . With this my father smiled upon me and said: What, mistress Eve, . . . hath my daughter *Alington* played the serpent with you, and with a letter set you awork to come tempt your father again, and for the favour that you bear him, labour to make him swear against his conscience? . . . And after that, he looked sadly again, and earnestly said unto me, Daughter *Margaret*, we two have talked of this thing ofter than twice or thrice, . . . and I have twice answered you too, that in this matter, if it were possible for me to do the thing that might content the king's grace, and God therewith not offended, then hath no man taken this oath already more gladly than I would do."

Alice Alington's letter had evidently been written on purpose to be shown to More, and was nothing but an indirect warning from the Lord Chancellor. A few days before, he had gone—and not by accident

[1] This letter is printed at the end of More's *English Works*. His biographers give long extracts from it; and it may be found complete, and more easily read, in the appendix to Roper's life of More (The King's Classics, 1903).

—to course a buck in Alice's husband's park, and had asked her to come and see him the next day. She went early and eagerly, expecting to hear some good news of him whom she called her father. After protesting his friendship for More, the Chancellor had added: "In good faith . . . I am very glad that I have no learning, but in a few of Æsop's fables, of the which I shall tell you one. There was a country in which there were almost none but fools, saving a few which were wise, and they by their wisdom knew that there should fall a great rain, the which should make them all fools, that should be fouled or wet therewith. They, seeing that, made them caves under the ground, till all the rain was past. Then they came forth, thinking to make the fools do what they list, and to rule them as they would. But the fools would none of that, but would have the rule themselves for all their craft. And when the wise men saw that they could not obtain their purpose they wished that they had been in the rain, and had defiled their clothes with them." Alice made no mistake about the meaning of the fable, and begged the Chancellor to make one more attempt for More's safety. The men of that date were certainly in less of a hurry than we are. Audley, whose own life was in no danger, had not let Lady Alington go without inflicting another fable on her. It was one we know already. More, who possibly took it from this letter of Alice's, made it the foundation of one of the chapters of the treatise he was then writing. It is the story of the ass and the wolf who went to confession,

In Audley's version, the ass, like La Fontaine's, was sent to the bishop's tribunal for a peccadillo, a scruple, while the wolf continued his depredations undisturbed.

"The Chancellor," remarks Nisard, "had at least the merit, being on the side of the fools and the wolves, not to pretend to wisdom and scruples like the king his master."

Poor bewildered Alice had not known what answer to make to this flood of literature, and had sent the equivocal message for what it was worth, so that Margaret might transmit it to the prisoner. More read the letter brought him by his daughter; then, characteristically enough—

"When he came to the end, he began it afresh and read over again. And in the reading he made no manner haste, but advised it leisurely, and pointed every word. And after that he paused, and then thus he said, 'Forsooth, daughter *Margaret*, I find my daughter *Alington* such as I have ever found her, and I trust ever shall, as naturally minding me as you that are my own.[1] Howbeit, her take I verily for mine own too, since I have married her mother, and brought up her of a child, as I have brought up you, in other things and learning both, wherein I thank God she findeth now some fruit, and bringeth her own up very virtuously and well. Whereof God, I thank him, hath sent her good store; our Lord preserve them and send her much joy of them, and my

[1] Alice Alington was Lady More's daughter by her first marriage.

good son her gentle husband too. . . . I am daily bedesman (and so write her) for them all. In this matter she has used herself like herself, wisely.'"

His first thought, then, was for those kind souls in distress, but the Lord Chancellor lost nothing by being kept waiting.

"But in this matter, *Megg*, to tell the truth between thee and me, my lord's Æsop's fables do not greatly move me. But as his wisdom, for his pastime, told them merely to my one daughter, so shall I, for my pastime, answer them to thee, *Megg*, that art mine other."

If the reader feels at all impatient, he should remember that here is a father bent on distracting the mind of his child, just as he had been used to do in the days when he took the little Meg on his knees and made up interminable stories to help her forget her childish troubles. More begins with a sly hit characteristic of the man of letters. He reminds his daughter that the first of the two riddles had not the honour of being a discovery of the Chancellor's. The fable of the rain which washed away the wits of all it fell on had been used by Wolsey, and Lord Audley, none too rich in invention himself, had found it among the traditions of the woolsack. More applies the fable very wittily, and draws from it a most sensible conclusion. "If those wise men, *Megg*, when the rain was gone at their coming abroad, where they found all men fools, wished themselves fools too, because they could not rule them, then seemeth it that the foolish rain was so sore a shower, that even through the ground it

sank into their caves, and poured down upon their heads, and wet them to the skin." "But," he added, "I trust my Lord (Audley) reckoneth me among the fools, and so reckoneth I myself, as my name is in Greek. . . . But surely, among those that long to be rulers, God and mine own conscience clearly knoweth, that no man may number and reckon me." He had struck a loftier note towards the end of his commentary, but the second fable makes him merry again.

"The second fable, *Marget*, seemeth not to be Æsop's. For by that the matter goeth all upon confession, it seemeth to be feigned since Christendom began. For in Greece, before Christ's days, they used not confession no more the men then than the beasts now. But what? who made it, maketh but little matter. Nor I envy not that *Æsop* hath the name."

Then comes a long commentary followed by a long story. More was quite willing to be the ass of the fable, but he refused to acknowledge that the step demanded of him was a mere peccadillo. Be that how it might, his conscience was so made, and even the example of old Bishop Fisher could not move it.

"Verily, daughter, I never intend (God being my good Lord) to pin my soul at another man's back, not even the best man that I know this day living."

Besides, was it quite certain that he stood alone in his opinion?

"Now thus far forth, I say for them that are yet alive. But go we now to them that are dead before, and that are, I trust, in heaven, I am sure that it is

not the fewer part of them, that all the time while they lived, thought in some of the things that way that I think now. . . . I pray God give me the grace that my soul may follow theirs. And yet I show you not all, *Marget*, that I have for myself in that sure discharge of my conscience.[1] But for the conclusion, daughter *Margaret*, of all this matter, as I have often told you, I take not upon me neither to define nor dispute in these matters, nor I rebuke not nor impugn any other man's deed, nor I never wrote, not so much as spake in any company, any word of reproach in anything that the Parliament had passed, nor I meddle not with the conscience of any other man, that either thinketh, or saith he thinketh, contrary unto mine. But as concerning mine own self, for thy comfort shall I say, daughter, to thee, that mine own conscience in this matter (I damn none other man's) is such, as may well stand with mine own salvation; thereof am I, *Megg*, as sure as that God is in heaven. . . ." "When he saw me sit with this very sad," Margaret continues, "as I promise you, sister, my heart was full heavy for the peril of his person, nay, for in faith I fear not his soul, he smiled upon me and said: How now, daughter *Marget?* What how, Mother Eve? Where is your mind now? Sit not musing with some serpent in your breast, upon some new persuasion, to offer father *Adam* the apple once again. In good faith, father (quoth I), I can no further go, but am (as I trow *Cressida* saith in Chaucer) come

[1] More frequently said that he would not give all the reasons which made it his duty to decline the oath.

to *Dulcarmon*, even at my wits' end. For sith the ensample of so many wise men cannot in the matter move you, I see not what to say more, but if I should look to persuade you with the reason that Master Harry Pattenson" (More's old fool) "made. For he met one day one of our men, and when he had asked where you were, and heard that you were in the Tower still, he waxed even angry with you and said: 'Why, what aileth him that he will not swear? Wherefore should he stick to swear? I have sworn the oath myself.' And so I can in good faith go now no further neither . . . but if I should say, like Master Harry: Why should you refuse to swear, father? for I have sworn myself. At this he laughed and said: That word was like Eve too, for she offered Adam no worse fruit than she had eaten herself."

And so the dialogue goes on.

## III

The year 1534 closed with an increase in the rigour of his confinement. More was now isolated. Since their entreaties had had no effect on him, his family were refused permission to visit him. In November Parliament passed an Act explicitly acknowledging the king as head of the Church of England. More seems to have had no further doubts on the fatal issue. The few letters he was able to send to his family were more affectionate than ever; letters of farewell, indeed, in which he is careful not

to forget the babes and their nurses, the maids and all the servants. To a fellow-prisoner, who was wavering in his first resolution, he repeats that he has never attempted to influence any one, no matter whom, to refuse the oath. Finally, in order to be still more alone, he watches all night in his cell, and is lost in still more earnest and unbroken prayer. It annoys him that people come far too often to weary him with new entreaties or supplementary examinations. What good could they do? It was only too clear by that time that the king's anger was at its height, and that the penalty was not far off. At the end of April he was summoned before a commission, and refused to give his opinion on the new statute. His answer to Cromwell was that he had fully determined himself "neither to study nor to meddle with any matter of the world, but that my whole study should be upon the Passion of Christ and mine own passage out of this world."[1]

"And here am I" (*i.e.* in prison) "yet in such case as I was, neither better or worse."[2] Once more, on May 6, his daughter was allowed to see him. The day was well chosen for this last assault. From the window, More, leaning on his daughter's shoulder, saw the monks of the Charterhouse going to martyrdom. "Lo, doest thou not see, Megg, that these blessed fathers be now as cheerfully going to their deaths as bridegrooms to their marriage? . . . For God, considering their long-continued life in most sore and grievous penance, will no longer suffer them to remain here in this vale of misery and iniquity,

[1] B. i. 402. [2] B. i. 403.

but speedily hence taketh them to the fruition of His everlasting Deity. Whereas thy silly father, Megg, that like a most wicked caitiff hath passed forth the whole course of his miserable life most sinfully, God, thinking him not so worthy so soon to come to that eternal felicity, leaveth him here yet still in the world further to be plagued and turmoiled with misery." [1]

Three days later, Cromwell, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chancellor, the Duke of Norfolk, and the Earl of Wiltshire came to bring him the king's latest commands. Silence was inadmissible, and his Majesty desired More to say what he thought of the statute. More refused to reply. Finally, they said to him brutally, Since you have no wish to live, why not say definitely that the law is bad? He made a noble reply: "I have not been a man of such holy living as I might be bold to offer myself to death, lest God, for my presumption, might suffer me to fall." [2]

The second batch of the London Carthusians were executed on June 19, and Bishop Fisher two days later. More was kept till the last. On July 1, 1535, he appeared before his judges. It was the first time he had left the Tower since his long months of imprisonment, and the crowd found some difficulty, perhaps, in recognising the bent old man with long beard and grey hair, who walked painfully, leaning on a stick. Who would have thought, five years before, that the Chancellor of England would one day return to Westminster, there to be condemned to death?

[1] Roper. [2] B. i. 408.

The accusation, which is drawn up in Latin, is excessively long, and loaded with false charges and imaginary complaints. It is based, not on the law of succession, but on the last Act of Parliament proclaiming the supremacy of the king over the Church of England. More persisted in the attitude which he had advised a client to adopt and had chosen for himself. He refused to commit himself on the subject of the statute. These were matters with which he did not meddle. He neither approved nor condemned, and kept his thoughts to himself. It gives one real pleasure to see him defending this standpoint with all his usual vigour and subtlety. The issue of the trial was never in doubt, but the old advocate seems to wish for a final victory before saying farewell to the bar. "Neither your statute nor any laws in the world," said he, "punish people except for words and deeds—surely not for keeping silence." The Attorney-General was obliged to interrupt him for fear the judges should be shaken, and a false witness was called, named Rich, who pretended that the accused had uttered seditious words to him. More collected his forces. Before long the Christian will pardon the perjurer; meanwhile the advocate, the man of honour, is speaking, and with no uncertain voice.

"If I were a man, my lords, that did not regard an oath, I need not stand in this place, at this time, as an accused person. And if this oath of yours, Mr Rich, be true, then I pray that I may never see the face of God, which I would not say were it otherwise to win the whole world."

The trial was continued in accordance with accepted forms. The jury retired for a few minutes, and then returned in haste as if overwhelmed by the evidence of the prisoner's guilt. They pronounced him guilty, and it only remained for the Chancellor to bow in his turn and pronounce the sentence.

And now More's mouth was opened. Up till then, professional scruples, and, still more, the fear of tempting God by throwing up his brief for his own defence, had persuaded him that it was his duty to play his part in this comedy of legality. But with the passing of the sentence the curtain had fallen. It was no longer a case of witnesses, counsel, and judges, but of a Christian confessing his faith in the midst of a number of unhappy men who loved him, admired him, and knew that he was right.

"Since I am condemned, and God knows how, I wish to speak freely of your statute, for the discharge of my conscience. For the seven years that I have studied the matter, I have not read in any approved doctor of the Church that a temporal lord could or ought to be head of the spirituality. . . . For one bishop of your opinion I have a hundred saints of mine; and for one Parliament of yours, and God knows of what kind, I have all the General Councils for 1000 years; and for one kingdom I have France and all the kingdoms of Christendom."

Then he was seized with great pity for all these men who no longer dared look him in the face, and a smile spread slowly over his lips, the smile he had doubtless worn before when bringing his friends to

the door of his house at Chelsea, and restoring them all to harmony, after a stormy philosophic discussion, by the mere force of his personal charm.

"More have I not to say, my Lords, but that like as the blessed apostle St Paul . . . was present and consented to the death of St Stephen . . . and yet be they now both twain holy saints in heaven, and shall continue there friends for ever, so I verily trust, and shall therefor right heartily pray, that though your lordships have now here in earth been judges to my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in heaven merrily all meet together to everlasting salvation."

"Merrily!" once more we have that delightful word, that comes better from his lips than any one's; and we see (for indeed it is he that seems the master here) the noble gesture of farewell which closes the sitting and dismisses the judges.

## IV

More was taken back to his cell. His son, who was awaiting his departure from Westminster Hall, threw himself at his knees and asked his blessing. More said good-bye to him and got into the boat. A dear friend of his, Sir William Kingston, Constable of the Tower, went with him, and could not restrain his tears. "Sir Thomas More, seeing him so sorrowful, comforted him with as good words as he could, saying: 'Good Master Kingston, trouble not yourself, but be of good cheer; for I will pray for you and my good lady your wife, that we may meet

in heaven together, where we shall be merry for ever and ever." Roper alone has the right to tell what follows.

"When Sir Thomas More came from Westminster to the Tower-ward again, his daughter, my wife, desirous to see her father, whom she thought she would never see in this world after, and also to have his final blessing, gave attendance about the Tower wharf, where she knew he should pass by before he could enter into the Tower. There, tarrying his coming, as soon as she saw him, after his blessing upon her knees reverently received, she, hasting towards him, without consideration or care of herself, pressing in amongst the midst of the throng and company of the guard, that with halberds and bills went round about him, hastily ran to him, and there openly, in sight of them all, embraced him, and took him about the neck and kissed him. Who well liking her most natural and dear daughterly affection towards him, gave her his fatherly blessing, and many godly words of comfort besides. From whom after she was departed, she, not satisfied with the former sight of her dear father, and like one that had forgotten herself, being all ravished with the entire love of her dear father, having respect neither to herself nor to the press of people and multitude that were there about him, suddenly turned back again, ran to him as before, took him about the neck, and divers times kissed him most lovingly; and at last, with a full and heavy heart, was fain to depart from him: the beholding whereof was to many of them that were present thereat so lament-

able, that it made them for very sorrow thereof to weep and mourn."

That was on July 1. On the following Monday, July 5, convinced that the end was not far off, More took off his hair-shirt and sent it to his daughter Margaret, with a letter, the last and most precious of all.

"Our Lord bless you, good daughter, and your good husband, and your little boy; and all yours, and all my children, and all my god-children, and all our friends. Recommend me, when you may, to my good daughter *Cicily*, whom I beseech our Lord to comfort. And I send her my blessing, and to all her children, and pray her to pray for me. I send her an handkerchief, and God comfort my good son her husband. My good daughter *Dance* hath the picture in parchment, that you delivered me from my Lady Coniers; her name is on the backside. Show her that I heartily pray her, that you may send it in my name to her again, for a token from me to pray for me. I like special well *Dorothy Coly*: I pray you be good unto her. I would wit whether this be she that you wrote me of. If not, yet I pray you be good to the tother, as you may in her affliction, and to my good daughter Joan Aleyn too. Give her, I pray you, some kind answer, for she sued hither to me this day to pray you be good to her. I cumber you, good *Margaret*, much, but I would be sorry if it should be any longer than to-morrow. For it is Saint Thomas's Eve, and the Utas of Saint Peter[1];

[1] St Thomas's Eve: *i.e.* the eve of the Feast of the Translation of the relics of St Thomas of Canterbury, July 7th. Utas: *i.e.* the octave day of the Feast of St Peter, June 29th.

and therefore to-morrow long I to go to God: it were a day very meet and convenient for me."

Even while he writes the letter, the thought of the meeting of a few days before comes upon him with poignant sweetness.

"I never liked your manner toward me better than when you kissed me last; for I love when daughterly love and dear charity hath no leisure to look to worldly courtesy. Farewell, my dear child, and pray for me, and I shall for you and all your friends, that we may merrily meet in heaven. I thank you for your great cost. I send now to my good daughter *Clement* her algorism stone, and I send her, and my godson, and all hers God's blessing and mine. I pray you at time convenient recommend me to my good son *John More*. I liked well his natural fashion.[1] Our Lord bless him and his good wife my loving daughter, to whom I pray him to be good, as he hath great cause; and that if the land of mine come to his hand, he break not my will concerning his sister *Dance*. And our Lord bless *Thomas*[2] and *Austen* and all that they shall have."[3]

## V

Early in the morning of July 6 came Sir Thomas Pope, "his singular good friend, with a message

[1] More is evidently speaking of his manner at their last meeting.

[2] Cresacre More is included in this blessing. In printing this letter in his Life of Thomas More, he puts in brackets, after the name of *Thomas*, who was then still a child, the words: "who was my father."

[3] Roper.

from the King and the council, that he was to suffer death on that day before nine of the clock." The king also desired of More that at his execution he should not use many words. "'Mr Pope,' quoth he, 'you do well to give me warning of the King's pleasure, for otherwise I had purposed at that time somewhat to have spoken; but no matter, wherewith his Grace, or any other, should have cause to be offended. Howbeit, whatsoever I intended, I am ready obediently to conform myself to his Highness's command; and I beseech you, good Mr Pope, to be a means to his Majesty that my daughter Margaret may be at my burial.' Then, Sir Thomas Pope taking his leave of him, could not refrain from weeping. Which Sir Thomas More perceiving, comforted him in this wise: 'Quiet yourself, good Master Pope, and be not discomforted, for I trust that we shall once in heaven see each other full merrily, where we shall be sure to live and love together, in joyful bliss eternally.'" And to draw him out of his melancholy he went on to make a joke, which, though perfectly innocent, would seem a little coarse to modern notions, and had better not be translated.[1]

"When he was gone," Cresacre continues, "Sir Thomas More, as one that had been invited to some solemn banquet, changed himself into his best apparel, and put on his silk camelot gown, which his entire friend, Mr Antony Bonvisi (a noble citizen of the state of Luca in Italy . . .) gave him, whilst he was in the Tower. Mr Lieutenant seeing him

[1] Cresacre More, chap. xi.

prepare himself so to his death, counselled him for his own benefit to put them off again, saying that he who should have them was but a javel.[1] 'What, Mr Lieutenant,' said Sir Thomas, 'shall I account him a javel who will do me this day so singular a benefit? Nay, I assure you, were it cloth of gold I would think it well bestowed on him. For St Cyprian, that famous Bishop of Carthage, gave his executioner thirty pieces of gold, because he knew he should procure unto him an unspeakable good turn.' Yet for all this Mr Lieutenant so pressed him, that at last, being loath for friendship's sake to deny him so small a matter, he altered his gown and put on a gown of frieze; but yet he sent of that little money which was left him one angel of gold to the hangman, in token that he maliced him nothing, but rather loved him exceedingly for it."

There is no mistaking the significance of this passage. On the morning of his execution, Sir Thomas More was still the same as ever. There is not a trace of exaltation or enthusiasm. He is calm rather than joyful; and he goes to his death rather as to an empty formality than to a festival. He remains thoroughly English to the end, neither trying any flights beyond his nature, nor searching for great words. Addison has drawn attention to this in a classic passage: "That innocent Mirth, which had been so conspicuous in his Life, did not forsake him to the last: . . . His Death was of a piece with his Life. There was nothing in it new, forced, or affected. He did not look upon the

[1] *i.e.* low fellow.

severing his Head from his Body as a Circumstance that ought to produce any Change in the Disposition of his Mind."[1] He jokes when bidding farewell to Sir Thomas Pope, and jokes all the way to the scaffold and on the scaffold itself, because there is never a moment at which humour is not natural to him. He never thinks of fortifying himself against fear, and still less of making a display of heroism. At most he wishes to cheer the woeful companions of his last walk. Burnett confides in us that these closing jokes struck many people as indecent, death being too solemn a thing to be jested with. He himself is too wise to go so far as that, but he inclines to think that such proceedings are rather Stoic than Christian. That is merely the petty spite of a man who had every reason for not admiring the simple courage and candour of noble souls. To tell the truth, I can see nothing that could properly be called either Stoic or Christian. Had he been more terrified, less sure of his eternal recompense, no doubt More would have behaved otherwise; but the grace that he had long prayed for enabled him to remain faithful to his own nature. The martyr who went to the scaffold with the gentle mockery on his lips that we shall shortly read was simply the Thomas More of every day. We may repeat, too, what we said before in connection with his writings. His humour, like all humour, is only on the surface, where, at such a moment, his inner life is not. His jests would be tasteless but for their spontaneity, their

[1] *Spectator*, No. 349.

unexpectedness. In reality, like his brethren, the martyrs of all ages, More at the bottom of his heart is talking with God, asking humbly for the grace he has need of, and withdrawing himself from all things, to see only "the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." [1]

"He was therefore brought about nine of the clock by Mr Lieutenant out of the Tower, his beard being long, which fashion he never had before used, his face pale and lean, carrying in his hands a red cross, casting his eyes often towards heaven. As he thus passed by a good woman's house, she came forth and offered him a cup of wine which he refused, saying: 'Christ in His passion drank no wine, but gall and vinegar.' There came another woman after him, crying unto him for certain books, which she had given to his custody when he was Lord Chancellor. To whom he said: 'Good woman, have patience but for one hour's space, and by that time the King's Majesty will rid me of the care I have for thy papers and all other matters whatsoever.' Another woman, suborned thereto, as some think, by his adversaries to dis-

[1] With More's quiet jokes may be compared Anne Boleyn's shouts of laughter when the hour of her doom had struck. Bossuet is very hard and unjust to the poor woman. "She began to laugh, either to make ostentation of an exaggerated intrepidity, or because her head was turned by the approach of death"; and he thinks that "God willed that the end of this princess should be as ridiculous as it was tragic" (*Variations*, livre vii.). Her laughter, as a matter of fact, was purely nervous, and not in the least ridiculous.

grace him, followed him also crying out against him, that he had done her great injury when he had been Lord Chancellor; to whom he gave the answer, that he remembered her cause very well; and that if he were now to give sentence thereof, he would not alter what he had already done. . . .

"Being now brought to the scaffold, whereon he was to be beheaded, it seemed to him so weak that it was ready to fall; wherefore he said merrily to Mr Lieutenant: 'I pray you, sir, see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself.'

"When he began to speak a little to the people which were in great troops there to hear and see him, he was interrupted by the Sheriff. Wherefore briefly he desired all the people to pray for him, and to bear witness with him that he there died in and for the faith of the Holy Catholic Church, a faithful servant of God and the king. Having spoken but this he kneeled down, and pronounced with great devotion the *Miserere* psalm, which being ended, he cheerfully rose up, and the executioner asking his forgiveness, he kissed him, saying: 'Thou wilt do me this day a greater benefit than ever any mortal man can be able to give me; pluck up thy spirit, man, and be not afraid to do thy office; my neck is very short; take heed therefore that thou strike not awry, for saving thy honesty.' When the executioner would have covered his eyes, he said: 'I will cover them myself'; and presently he did so, with a cloth he had brought with him for

the purpose. Then laying his head upon the block, he bade the executioner stay until he had removed aside his beard, saying that that had never committed any treason. So with great alacrity and spiritual joy, he received the fatal blow of the axe. . . . And thus he found those words true, which he had often spoken, that a man may lose his head and have no harm; yea, I say unspeakable good and endless happiness."[1]

[1] Cresacre More, cap. xi.

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